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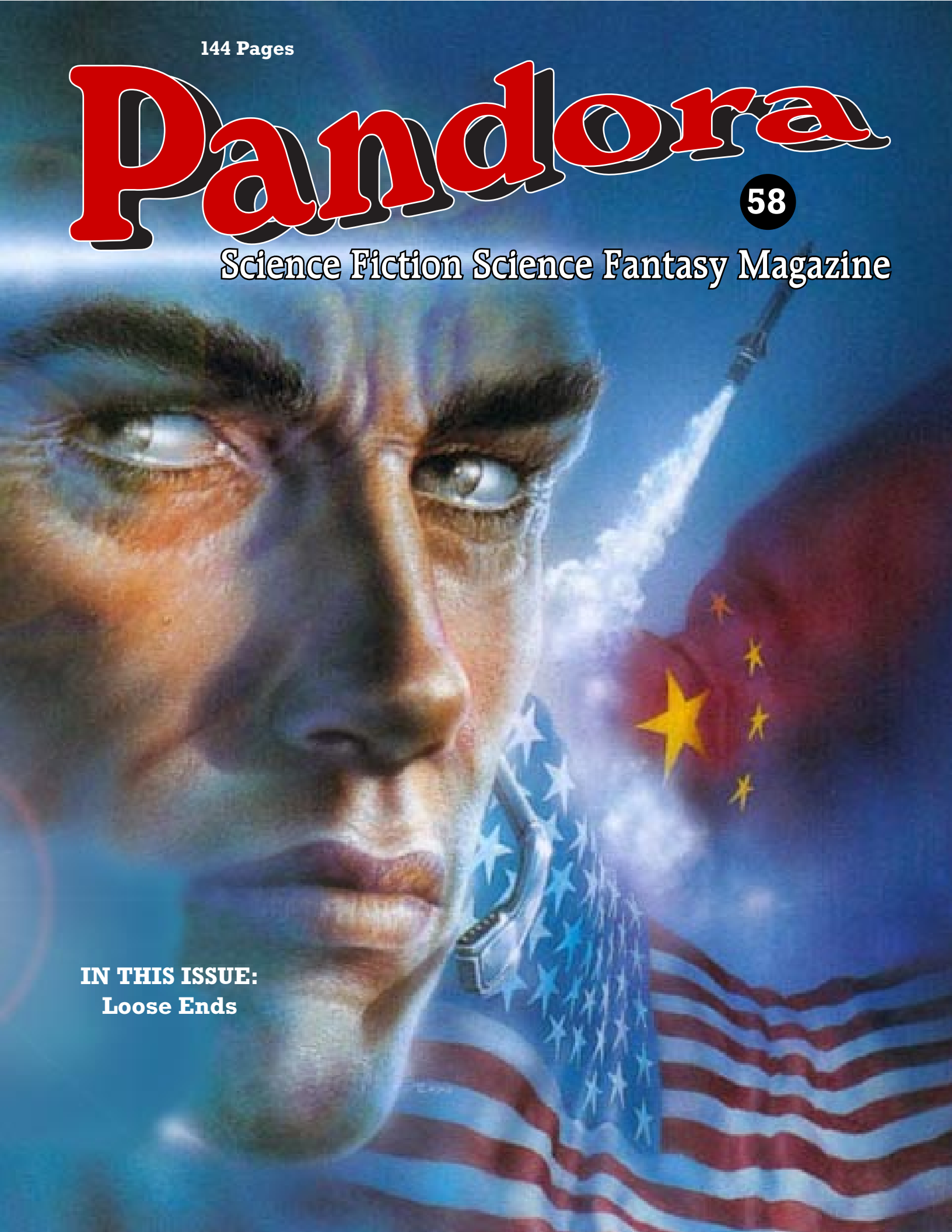

IN THIS ISSUE:
Loose Ends

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LOOSE ENDS
by
William Kern
Only Richard Constable knew where the 100 million dollars was hidden. All he had to do was stay alive long enough to grab it!

ONE

DALLAS HOUSTON CALHOUN was either extraordinarily adept at hiding or the agency for which he once worked really believed he had been killed by an unknown assassin.

Or they knew he was alive but had no interest in finding him.

We had participated in a Department of Intelligence and Counter Espionage operation in 1987 and we had become two of the several barely walking wounded; he with a rather nasty wound to the left hip that was likely to leave him wheelchair bound, and I with multiple wounds that had kept me hospitalized for three weeks and struggling with outpatient therapy for nearly five months.

Still, as bad as that may sound, I considered myself fortunate. Nine of DICE's agents had been killed that day, and several had lost limbs. One was blinded.

DICE, like all federal agencies, buried its dead, mended its wounded, retired those who could no longer serve, chalked it up as a victory and immediately began making plans for broader and bolder adventures.

But a few of the best hired hands were retained to search for the remnants of an organization they knew as Capricorn and the one hundred million dollars that vanished that day.

Yeah, a lot of people think Calhoun is dead, but I know better.

The day I checked out of the hospital, an orderly handed me a small envelope; a Get Well card from Dallas Houston Calhoun with a brief note explaining in a very general way how I could find him when I felt well enough to ride a horse twenty miles up a mountain in Idaho, and if I could convince Brandy to

come along for the ride. By the time summer rolled around and I felt tough enough to go, I had no trouble making my decision.

But convincing Brandy was a whole 'nuther problem. For two weeks, I felt like I was talking to a foreign exchange student who hadn't learned to speak English.

She finally agreed to come along, I think, just to shut me up.

We should have stayed in San Diego.

Two weeks later, having followed Calhoun's instructions, here's a picture of Richard and Brandy Constable camped at Boyd's Creek, a tributary of the Selway River in north central Idaho. In a day or two, after I studied the maps of the area and scouted the surrounding terrain, I planned to acquire a horse and tack and head into the mountains to find Calhoun.

Brandy was stirring up a hobo breakfast of eggs scrambled with fried potatoes and diced Spam, and a pot of coffee was thumping and gurgling over the campfire. The Selway was foaming toward the Clearwater and the pines were whispering in the wind. Winter was gone but another winter seemed to be lurking over the mountains to the west and great rain clouds rolled ominously from horizon to zenith with curtains of ice crystals sweeping from their tops.

It was a normal day for the area and time of year and a perfect place to be for someone who had nothing better to do than sit in a chair and watch the sun move across the sky. I should have been overjoyed, should have been thanking whatever gods who had arranged such lovely places for human beings to visit. But I wasn't; I was looking at a large scale map of the area while I contemplated the hazardous, perhaps even impossible, search for Dallas Calhoun.

Brandy watched the river for awhile then turned to me. "Do you ever miss being in the Navy?" she asked.

"Oh, I used to before I met you," I answered, "but not too much anymore. There was a time when I'd have gone back for ten more years but I kept putting it off, then I got too old so I began drifting around the country just to keep from going funny."

"Didn't work, did it?" She smiled, scooping the food from the iron spider.

"What?"

"Nothing," she mumbled, passing a plate to me and getting comfortable in her folding chair with her own breakfast. "Why are you studying the maps?"

"Well, I have to go up this river to find Calhoun in a day or two and the only way to get there is on a horse. I want to know where I'm going."

She sat on the firepit and stared at the ridge for a while, her face a mask of confusion and concern.

"What will you do if you go up there and find him, then?"

"Depends on what he has to say, I reckon."

"What does it mean, Richard?" Brandy asked presently. "If it is Calhoun, why didn't he just take the money and go to Europe or somewhere else and really begin a new life? Why is he out here hiding in the hills where we can find him?"

I could only think of one really good reason why an agent from DICE would be here when he didn't have to be.

"Looks to me like they have another

operation going," I said. "Or the same one not finished. Allison Haniford told me as much."

I could have let it go, I suppose, and perhaps I should have. But I hate loose ends; I wanted to find out what really happened that day at Big Bear Lake when one of DICE's hitmen shot and critically wounded Calhoun.

"I hope you'll think about it seriously before you do anything you'll regret," she said quietly.

"You shouldn't worry about it Peach. I'll take care of it and, one way or the other, we'll be out of here in a week, maybe less."

She picked up the plates, stood and walked to the trash barrel where she scraped them clean. When she returned she pulled her chair up so she was facing me and sat down solemnly. She looked at her hands, digging at her nails again, a habit that told me she had something serious to say.

I began erecting mental barriers.

"Look, Richard," she began softly, "we've only known each other for a couple of years and we've been through a lot together in that short time. Most of it has been wonderful, you know that. But I'm having a lot of trouble coping with all this agency business."

"You're trying to talk me out of this, aren't you?"

She took my hands, trembling on the verge of tears. "Of course, damn it," she cried, "of course I'm trying to talk you out of it. Hasn't there been enough intrigue in your life? This isn't going to solve anything, prove anything. It will be just more senseless madness. It isn't revenge, it isn't justice, and you won't change the world by going up there to see if Calhoun has all that money."

She lowered her head against my knees and began weeping, her body convulsing with uncontrollable sobs. I patted her head gently as if she were a child with a scraped elbow, knowing she was right but refusing to admit it.

When I tried consoling her with soothing words, assuring her everything would work out fine, she pulled away, grabbed the plates and went into the motor-home. Some minutes later I could hear her washing the dishes, attacking them with savage frustration.

Wishing they were me, no doubt.

I should listen to her more often than I do. She's able to think more rationally, more intuitively than I, can see the side of events I often block from my mind. More than once she has saved me from making grievous errors of judgement.

Dallas Calhoun had somehow managed to make many people believe he had been killed while he was recovering from the gunshot wound he'd suffered when an assassin had shot him while he and I were discussing Operation Capricorn at my cabin at Big Bear Lake.

I'd taken Calhoun's pistol, found the man nearby and had killed him. It had nothing to do with skill on my part; rather, it was impatience on his part. We were both hiding in the trees. He moved first.

The assassin had been one of DICE's agents. He had also been in Vietnam when that fifty-four billion dollars was being slated for the furnaces and, because that's what Calhoun was investigating, I figured that's why the guy tried to kill

him.

But, later, Steve Dansforth told me someone had slipped into Calhoun's room at Walter Reed hospital and injected him with a lethal poison. Everyone began playing it like Calhoun was dead and I'd had no reason to question it until Allison Haniford had whispered to me that I shouldn't worry about Calhoun just before she climbed on a helicopter and was taken back to Green Hill Farms in rural Virginia to resume her duties as one of the main frame majordomos.

When I received that Get Well card and letter and remembered what Allison Haniford had told me, I knew that Calhoun was alive and well and living somewhere on planet Earth. All I had to do was ride twenty miles or so up the mountain and find out for myself if Calhoun was really up there.

As I was working out my plan, a big motorhome came down the grade and stopped at the adjacent campsite. Four men piled out and began removing pieces to discover the source of the problem as steam billowed from under the hood and the smell of hot metal drifted across the space between us.

Brandy came out to stand beside me as one of the men began belaboring the driver for letting the radiator run out of water. It was easy to see from where I was standing that a hose was split. An intense argument followed, accompanied by a lot of cursing and tire kicking.

Finally the man who appeared to be the leader came over and shouted at me.

"You know anything about engines?"

If he had asked it differently, I would have pointed out the split hose. Instead, I said, "It's out of water."

"No shit, smartass. What do we do about it is what I want to know."

"Let it cool, find the leak, fix it, fill it with water from that river over there and be on your way," I said, trying to sum up the matter in a sentence.

"Right." He mumbled remarks about my ancestors being troglodytes, scuffed back to the motorhome where he waved his arms and paced for awhile, then they all piled back into the motorhome to continue the argument. It wore down finally to an occasional censorable expletive while the tortured engine hissed and thumped and clanked itself into silence.

Brandy and I watched for a few minutes then went into our own motorhome; she to read, I to nap. A knock on the door woke me around noon and I heard Brandy talking to someone outside.

"Lady," a man's voice was saying, "I'd like to apologize for my friend. It was a hot, miserable trip and then the engine overheated. It got everyone bent sideways is all. I hope you'll forgive us."

"Of course," Brandy replied. "It's happened to all of us at some time or other. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks," the man said, apparently cheered that he'd succeeded in placating her so easily. "What place is this, anyhow?"

"That's the Selway River. That's Boyd's Creek. The falls are up that way. Are you going to spend the night?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it? Look, tell your husband we apologized, won't you?"

"Yes, I will."

Silence.

I sat up and looked out the window. The man was walking back to his rig with his shoulders hunched up and his hands in his pocket while his comrades peered out the windows to see how he'd fared.

Brandy came in smiling. "He apologized," she said.

"No, he didn't; he sent his monkey to do it for him."

"It's the same thing, Richard."

"No it isn't. The son-of-a-bitch should have had the balls to do it himself."

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "God, Richard," she groaned, "why do you have to be so contentious? Can't you just accept the apology and let it go at that?"

I puffed and fell back on the couch. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a rag. Come here and sit beside me."

"Why?'

"What do you mean, why? Do I have to have a reason for you to sit with me now?"

"Why?"

"I just want you to sit with me for awhile, that's all. We should talk about things, about what we're going to do tomorrow or the next day."

She sighed lightly and folded her arms across her chest. "We have talked about it; so many times I've lost count. You make all the decisions. You say what we're gong to do and you don't listen to what I want, Richard. I just don't see the point anymore."

I patted the seat, motioning for her to sit.

"Then tell me what you want, Brandy. What do you think we should do?"

"You already know what I want. I want to go home, back to San Diego. I want you to forget about Calhoun and all this damned intrigue. You've become obsessed with finding people who may not even be alive anymore and I'm afraid it's going to make you crazy. I'm afraid of what it's doing to us. Can't you understand that?"

I closed my eyes and sighed, knowing my desire to help Calhoun had sorely taxed our relationship, knowing if I couldn't resolve it in my own mind it might drive her away from me forever. I knew how easy it would be to agree with her, stow all the gear and drive away. The chance to escape was as near as the ignition switch on the dash.

But I couldn't stand up and do what I knew was the intelligent thing to do and my silent hesitation had already told her all she needed to know.

"So there it is, you see," she said softly. "Finding out what Calhoun is up to has become more important to you than anything else, Richard. More important than our love. More important than our life together; more important than anything we can achieve in the future. That's pretty sad."

"A few more days, Brandy; that's all I ask," I protested selfishly. "It'll be over in a few days and we can leave."

"It'll be over when one of us, or all of us, has been killed. I see that. Why can't you see that? I already feel dead, Richard, and you have killed me with your obsessive desire to find those people. No! Don't tell me you won't try to kill them if you must. You will. I know, you know, and when you find them, they'll know. If you don't kill them first, they'll kill you.

But either way, Richard, it will be the end of me. Do you really think my love for you can be the same when I know you spent seven months last year relentlessly hoping to find Halsey and Colonel Fourney and God only knows who next, just so you can help kill them? How do you think that makes me feel? I'm afraid of you; of what you've become."

She looked away, tears filling her eyes, her lips quivering as she tried vainly to keep from crying again. I put my hands out to her but she stood abruptly and began putting the dishes away while she avoided looking at me.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Brandy," I said. "I just want to talk to Calhoun and find out if he stole part of the money and why he faked his death and disappeared. I want to know for us. Don't you see those at the agency will never be able to trust us as long as this is incomplete? We know what he's done; they'll always live in fear that we might tell someone he's alive. If we go back to San Diego now we'll never know when they might show up to kill us. I can't live like that, looking over my shoulder every day waiting for someone to walk up behind us. Do you understand?"

She sighed, screwing a napkin into a tight knot as she turned to face me. "Yes, I know that, but, God, I wish there was a better way to do this."

"There isn't. These people are like mad dogs; you have to bash them with an axe handle before they bite you. Come sit beside me, Peach."

She sat with her hands folded in her lap, her face drawn as she agonized over our predicament. I put my arms around her and she pressed against me, trembling as we embraced, her cries of anguish stifled against my chest.

"I'm so tired," she said presently. "Just exhausted. Can't we sleep for a while?"

I pulled the shades, locked the door, undressed and fetched a flannel comforter from the bed while she shrugged out of her clothes, then we lay together on the bed; I on my back, she on her side with one leg across my thighs and her head on my arm.

"You know I love you, don't you, Brandy?" I asked as I combed her hair with my fingers.

"I know."

Moments later she sighed lightly and turned away, crying herself to sleep.

TWO

We were awakened two hours later by the odor of burning food. Brandy sat up, pulling the covers over her breasts and peered out the window toward the adjoining camp.

"Good God," she cried, shaking me awake. "Richard, do something; their steaks are on fire and they all seem to be gone!"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked sleepily.

"Go put out the fire. Go find them or something. Look, it's a pretty big flame!"

I squinted out the window. Sure enough, four Ribeye steaks were being cremated on one of those four dollar grills, the flames leaping to the bottoms of the windows dangerously near the motor home. I eased off the couch, pulled on my trousers and padded barefoot over to push the grill away from the rig, look-

ing up and down the river and into the trees above for any signs of the other men. Unable to locate them, I dumped a can of water over the steaks to douse the fire then grumbled back to find Brandy just stepping out of the shower.

"Wait a minute," I said, "that isn't fair. You did that to get me out so you could take a shower."

"Hey, my momma didn't raise any dumb kids. I didn't need you in there feeling around while I was trying to wash."

"Cruel and inhumane treatment."

"Take a shower," she said, "I see them coming back."

I got in the shower and scrubbed while Brandy clanked around in the galley fixing something to eat. By the time I was dressed she had prepared an ample bowl of beef stew and biscuits and had poured two glasses of cold milk. I sat opposite her, tugging on my shoes, then pulled back the curtains to watch the nonsense next door.

"What are they doing?" Brandy asked.

"Burying their dead meat; I think they're going to bed without supper tonight."

"They'll fix something else."

"I doubt they had the good sense to bring anything else judging from their activities so far. Are you feeling better?"

"I'm okay, Richard," she replied. "I was just tired."

She leaned forward and peeked out the window. It was obvious from the disconsolate looks on their faces our obnoxious neighbors had destroyed their one and only meal. The loud mouth leader was scolding a blond haired kid who seemed to be responsible for starving them all. He stood with his head down, kicking a groove in the dirt and nodding obediently. Presently his tormentor stomped into the motor home while the kid flipped an obscene gesture at his back.

"Real civilized bunch, are they not?" I asked sarcastically.

"Maybe I should take them some beef stew."

I looked at the bowl. "Not enough to go around, Brandy," I said. "Besides, it isn't our problem. Let them find their own way."

"I have two more cans. I'm going to take them over."

I shook my head, knowing I wasn't going to talk her out of it. "They'll have you cooking it, you know. Are you ready for that?"

She got up, dug two cans from the pantry and headed for the door.

"They wouldn't do that," she said confidently. "I'll be right back."

I watched her walk to the coach and disappear around the far side, then went back to my meal. Presently she reappeared, head down and plowing resolutely back with the cans. She came in, slammed the door, shoved the cans back into the pantry and sat down with her green eyes flashing daggers.

I raised an eyebrow.

"I don't want to talk about it," she growled.

"They asked you to cook it."

"I said I didn't want to talk about it."

We finished the meal in silence until I pushed my plate away and finished off the milk. Then, very softly, she said, "Bas-

tards."

I grabbed two mugs the cabinet above the sink and poured coffee, shoving one to her. She stirred in some creamer and sipped the steaming brew, carefully avoiding looking out the window.

"Well," I said, hoping to cheer her up, "do you want to play a couple hands of rummy?"

"They have a lot of computer equipment, printers and stuff, in their motor home, Richard. What do you suppose they're doing?"

"I don't know; you want to play rummy or not"

"Not."

"Scrabble? Strip poker? How about a fast game of strip...."

"I want to know what they're doing with all that computer stuff. It's like the equipment we had in the agency motor home. Not the same, but similar. What are they doing with it, do you suppose?"

I looked toward the other motor home, saw two men sitting at the table examining samples of some liquid in corked bottles. One of them appeared to write something in a notebook for awhile then continued his debate with the second man.

"Medical students?" I ventured as one of the men spotted us, rose from the table and headed toward the door.

"Better grab a club," I said. "Here comes trouble."

He raised a hand in a feeble gesture of greeting as he approached and I went to the door to see what he wanted while Brandy got busy with the dishes.

"Hi," the man said. "I know we've been a pain in the ass, but we were wondering if you could drive us down to Lowell so we can get something to eat. We haven't fixed our radiator yet."

I opened my mouth to refuse but Brandy's voice came out, saying she would gather up some firewood while we were gone so we could pop some corn later in the evening. I scowled at her darkly, silently asking what the hell but she fluttered her eyelashes and smiled sweetly.

"Don't be too late " she sang.

"Oh, great," said the young men. "Thanks a lot. You can go along if you want, ma'am; we don't want to put you out of your home."

"Not at all," Brandy smiled. "I'll be just fine."

The man thanked us again and strode away. I turned to Brandy and huffed with exasperation.

"What was that for? I don't want to take them all the way to Lowell. I'm not sure there's any place to eat there anyhow."

"Go and have fun," Brandy replied. "Take your time, too, so I can snoop around over there and see what all that stuff is."

"Oh, I see. You getting paranoid or what?"

"I want to see what they have in there and what it's connected to, that's all. Now go."

I pulled on my jacket and joined her at the door. The men didn't look like operatives —not any I'd encountered, anyway— but it's tough to tell these days. She might have a hunch about them and it wouldn't hurt to know what they were do-

ing parked so conveniently close to us.

"Be careful," I said. "They may have rigged something to alert them you've been looking around. Don't touch or move anything, okay?"

"I know how to do this, Richard." She stood on tiptoe, kissed me gently, smiling for the first time in weeks, and stepped outside. A few minutes later all four men from the disabled coach walked over and piled aboard in a confusion of noise and bickering, each blaming the others for their predicament. The leader, with a raised hand, called for silence and introduced himself and the others.

"I'm Albert Harper," he said. "That's Carl Evans; Tom Cheney; Harry Collins."

They all insisted on shaking hands and clapping me on the back as we were introduced, jostling and shoving in the narrow aisle.

"Hi, I'm Richard Constable," I said four times as they found places to sit or lounge where they could watch the scenery or nap while I started the engine and pulled out, flashing daggers at Brandy as we passed.

She smiled and waved with a stick she'd pulled from under the pines, guiding me out like a plane director on a carrier deck.

Albert, who had taken the passenger seat, switched on the radio and settled back comfortably with his eyes closed.

"What are you doing up here, Constable?" he asked presently.

"Retired and on holiday," said I. "How about you guys; what're you doing here?"

"We're from the Markham Institute in Washington, D.C. If we can get the motor home repaired we're going to study the effects of pollution on the rivers and lakes and on the trees and other indigenous plants. But you; I don't believe you're retired because you're too young for it, and I know you're not independently wealthy. If you were I think you'd be flying around the world in a 747 or sailing the seas in a three-masted schooner or something like that."

"That your image of someone who's had the good sense to squirrel away some money for their old age?"

"Of course," he said. "That's what television has done to us, see? And another thing: This is a nice motor home but certainly not the top of the line; anyway, it has to be two or three years old if it's a day."

"Well, Albert," I said flatly, "I'm happy with this rig and I never said I was independently wealthy; just retired with enough money to be comfortable."

"I don't even believe that. You might be unemployed but you're not retired."

I stared straight ahead, annoyed at the arrogant bastard beside me, horsed the rig down the winding gravel road. His words rang in my ears and I wondered if he knew I was lying. His questions didn't sound like those of an environmentalist and his comments were rude and presumptuous. Had I known Brandy was finished snooping around their motor home I'd have driven back to the camp, booted them out and let them survive on their own.

"How long you been retired, then," he asked after a minute of silence.

"Four years." I offered no more.

"Four years? Retired young, didn't

you?

"Twenty years in the Navy."

"Ah," he said. "What was your MOS?"

"Photographer."

"Twenty years taking pictures? Sounds boring as hell to me."

I ground my teeth, resisting the temptation to open the door and shove him headlong into the brambles at the side of the road. He seemed to be purposely trying to annoy me but it could have been his nature. Some people as just natural born asses. He watched me for awhile and when I didn't respond, he closed his eyes again, humming out of tune with the radio.

I reached up and switched it off.

"You seem like a man with something on his mind," he said presently. "Like you're looking for something you can't find. I'm a good judge of people, Constable; are you looking for something you can't find?"

I glanced at him sideways, pulled off the road as far as I could and stopped, glaring at him balefully.

"You don't want to talk about it, then?" he asked.

"Would you like to walk back to Boyd's Creek?" I replied.

"Hey, Albert," Carl called from the back, "why don't you for Christ's sake shut up. Not everyone can take your bullshit the way we do. You don't even know the man; just shut up before he tosses us out. Damn!"

I looked in the rearview mirror and found Carl and the others staring at Albert, assessing him as a man who talked too much, pried too much into the lives of others. There were a million carbon copies of Albert scattered all over the world; the very kinds of people who drove me to the road in the first place. The kinds of people who kept me awake at night while I tried to figured out how to strangle them or toss them into a lake with rocks tied to their ankles.

"Well, if you ever want to talk," Albert said, rummaging in the magazine rack for a travelogue.

"I'll sure keep that in mind."

Carl uncurled from the couch where he'd been dozing and wobbled toward the bathroom as I got back on the road. When he emerged moments later, he came forward and talked Albert into relinquishing the passenger seat. We talked photography while he attempted some shots through the window with his Nikon. I was tempted to tell him he was wasting his time and money but decided he should learn that for himself. The best lessons in the world are the ones that get into your wallet.

"Ah someday," Carl said, wagging a finger at the magazine on the center console, "after I've finished this expedition, I think I'll try to get a job with an outfit like that."

And with your degree in microbiology or whatever you have, they'd probably hire you, I thought. Even if you don't know one end of a camera from the other. Said, instead: "I don't think you could handle the deadlines."

"Really? I think it would be a challenge."

"Of course."

"How do you get a job with a magazine like this?" he asked.

"First, I imagine, you have to be

good. Then they have to have an opening for which you apply. Then you have to be hired from among a hundred other applicants. Then you have to be better than you said you were."

Carl chuckled, "I can't see where deadlines would be a problem. It should be a snap."

"You have it backwards," I said. "Photos don't make deadlines; deadlines make photos. Or break them. I've worked with deadlines all my life; they stink. They make you crazy. They turn your brains to garbage and send you into smoky little bars trying to figure out what sin you committed to have to endure such misery. Are you married?"

"Yeah; seven years," he responded, somewhat reluctantly I thought.

"Then don't work for a publishing company if you want to keep your happy home. Your wife is the first thing of value you'll lose."

"Ah, so that's what gnawing on you," Albert said from behind me. "You lost a wife somewhere along the way."

"Left or lost, yes. I've seen it happen too many times. Ninety percent of the people I know who've worked for any kind of publishing company are either divorced or on their way. They suck you dry then toss you out when you're no good to yourself or anyone else. Just when your life goes to hell and you really need the security, you get five minutes notice, if you're lucky, and you're gone, on the street. Just stick to what you're doing now and you'll die a happy man."

We reached the station at Lowell later just as the sun was sailing behind the western clouds, casting a pall of darkness under the trees. The four men piled out and gathered at the door waiting for me but I refused their invitation to join them, explaining that I'd wait in the comfort and quiet of the motor home.

"Ah, come on, Constable," Carl urged. "Have a cold one with us. We'll clamp a lid on Albert if he starts giving you a bad time. What do you say?"

I protested, hoping they'd go away and leave me alone. "I don't think so."

"We have a tough day ahead of us tomorrow," Albert said before anyone else could speak. "Our guide will be at the camp early to get us on our way and I don't want you three to be nursing hangovers. He comes in here sometimes; if he's here tonight, I don't want him to see you acting like a bunch of fools."

"Who's your guide?" I asked.

"Some fellow named Moon," Albert replied.

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to explore the canyons for soil and water samples and we have to go on horseback because there are no roads. I'm not looking forward to it, I'll tell you the truth, but there's no other way to get where we want to go."

I climbed out of the motor home and decided to join them, hoping to convince them to let me join them the following day.

"Hey, come on, Albert," Tom whined. "Let's go."

"Just a minute. Are you coming in, Constable?"

"I reckon," I said, peering into the lowering darkness. "Which direction are you headed tomorrow?"

"Up river three or four miles above the falls. Why?"

"I'd like to go along, if you don't mind. Think your outfitter can provide another horse?"

"I don't know why not. If he isn't here tonight, I'll give him a call and let him know." He clapped me on the back. "It'll be fun having you along."

He turned to the others, interrupting a plan to yank him from his horse and toss him down the canyon the following day.

"Knock it off!" he hollered, shattering the stillness and startling birds from nearby branches. "I just want you to tell you Constable's coming with us tomorrow."

The others gathered around punching and shoving, welcoming me aboard as if we'd just met. I shuddered, thinking of riding with them out in the middle of nowhere and almost backed out. I could have gone up the canyon alone but I wanted their company as cover, thinking I could slip away later, maybe tell them I was turning back when we got close enough to Calhoun's cabin that I could find it on my own. It would probably take several hours to find the cabin anyway, and the terrain was rough and treacherous; it wouldn't hurt to have company for the first portion of the trip under those circumstances.

I thanked everyone, grinning like a clown and turned to Albert. "You oughta lighten up on these guys a little," I said. "They look like they can take care of themselves."

"They drink to much and they get obnoxious," he replied, waving his hands and addressing them all. "I'm telling you now that you will not get drunk and you will not start any fights. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, mommy," Harry pouted.

Carl walked up beside me and tapped me on the shoulder. "You going to have something to drink, Richard?" he asked.

"I think I will. What do you say, Albert, you going to give these guys a break and let them have a few drinks or what?"

"Yeah, Christ, Albert, don't be such a mommy. We're big boys now; we re not going to get into trouble," Tom moaned. "What do you say?"

"I'm hungry," Harry said defiantly. "And, besides, this is bullshit. You don't have the right to tell us what do to, supervisor or not."

"Looks like a veto, Albert," I said, "Why not enjoy the evening?"

"No, I m not going to drink and I don't think they should either, but if they want to I can't stop them."

"You're being a rag, Albert," Carl growled. "We're grown men, not a bunch of little kids at a church picnic. I'm going to get something to eat; you guys coming?"

Harry hesitated as if he thought it might be better to stay in the good graces of his supervisor, then reconsidered and decided it didn't matter one way or the other.

"Yeah," he answered, "I believe I will."

Annoyed at the usurpation of his authority, Albert turned away and stomped to the bar ahead of us. I watched him go, thinking seriously of getting in the motor

home and driving back without them. I had too much on my mind to listen to their bickering. Albert was an annoying jerk, treating the others as if they were children and he was their house mother.

In the end I decided to go just to keep an eye on them, listen to what they had to say and learn all I could about them. With the right questions, that could be a lot.

We walked toward the bar, each of us lost in our own thoughts, until Tom broke the silence.

"Why is Albert being such an ass, Carl?" he asked.

"He's afraid we're going to screw up his little project and make him look bad back at the Institute. It's a matter of job security with him. He's so goddamned scared he's going to get a bad review he's become inflexible, wants to dictate our every move."

"This is a hell of a way to begin your trip," I ventured.

"It is at that," Carl nodded, hunching up his shoulders against the cool night air. "But I hate to be mothered like a schoolboy. Christ, he's like a first sergeant sometimes, mustering up his troops for a C.O. who didn't even schedule an inspection. The dumb shit hasn't got enough sense to understand no one will know unless he tells them if we get falling down drunk or not. He worries for nothing."

"Some people are like that," I said, trying to smooth over the problem. Especially people who work for the government.

"Hey, my first wife was like that," Carl bitched, flinging his arms and spitting the words contemptuously. "That's why I can call her my first wife. She frapping near drove me crazy; damned near drove me stark, raving mad."

"I didn't know you were married," Tom said. "How come you never mentioned it?"

"I wasn't married, Tom; I was institutionalized. The bitch was warden of a prison disguised as a two-story white clapboard house in the suburbs of Fort Wayne, Indiana. I used to lay awake at night thinking of all the different ways I could kill her without getting caught. Damn! Just frapping near drove me crazy!"

"Carl?" Tom said as we reached the side door of the bar.

"What?"

"You're wrong; she succeeded. You're completely around the bend."

We filed in and easily found seats in the nearly deserted bar. Albert headed for the men's room while the rest of us sat and waited for someone to come over and take our orders. The bartender, a willowy nymph wearing a pair of tight jeans, cotton halter and open-toed high heel shoes with wrap around ankle straps, looked away from the droning television set chained to the corner, spotted us and swung down to the near end of the bar where she stood just within shouting distance.

"We ain't got no waitress," she yelled, "so you'll hafta come up to get your drinks."

She looked back at the television, entranced by a rerun of Magnum, PI, and Carl volunteered to make the trip to the bar for the drinks and a closer look at the girl's ample bosom.

"Where'd Albert go?" I asked.

"In the head so he won't have to buy. I gotta check out this girl; what do you want to drink?"

"A beer," I answered. "Any kind. How about you guys?"

"Tom drinks gin slings. Harry drinks beer and Albert's getting a soda."

Carl hitched up his trousers and ambled—I swear to God, ambled—over to the bar where he ordered rounds and began an animated conversation with the girl. She drew the beers, manufactured two mixed drinks, popped open a Pepsi for Albert, took his ten and walked back to the far end of the bar where she placed an elbow and her right breast on top of the Formica countertop without missing more than three point five seconds of Magnum and the red Ferrari.

Balancing the drinks on a stained plastic tray, Carl walked back to the table shaking his head and grinning just as Albert returned from the restroom.

"She isn't wearing a bra, man. Her nipples are sticking out this far," he said through clenched teeth, measuring about an inch of air with his thumb and forefinger. "Go take a look."

"Look at what?" Albert asked as he pulled out a chair and sat.

"The broad; she isn't wearing a bra. Got nipples like this." He made the measurement again, a little larger this time.

"Pay no attention, Albert," Harry said. "It's apparently an illusion conjured out of a sick mind."

"Bullshit!" Carl protested. "Go take a look."

"Right, Carl," Tom laughed, "We'll just walk over and say, excuse me, miss, but my sick friend says you have nipples two inches long, mind if I take a look? Jesus, what a thing to get excited about. No wonder your wife divorced you."

"Ex-wife," corrected Carl indignantly. "And besides, she didn't divorce me; I divorced her so back off."

Tom tipped his glass and sipped a quarter inch of the pink liquid, sat the glass down in the same wet circle and smiled sadly.

"Only the best of friends can talk to each other like this; did you know that, Constable?"

"I reckon so. Anyone see the guide?"

Albert shook his head, glancing around the bar.

"He didn't come in tonight," Carl said.

"How do you know??"

"Because I asked the girl with the big tits, that's how. They don't have anything to eat, either, unless you want beer nuts, potato chips or beef jerky."

I sighed lightly, wishing they'd had the common sense to bring food for more than a single meal. There was enough in the motor home but it wouldn't last long with their four mouths destroying it, and it was a cinch there were no restaurants within driving distance. With empty stomachs, it wouldn't take them long to get roaring drunk or sick, or both. I suggested they return to camp, get a good night's sleep and worry about food the next day but Carl was opposed to the idea, having convinced himself he could sweet talk the girl into a rendezvous where he could coax the objects of his fascination from beneath the halter.

"Forget it, Carl," I said. "You can't

compete with the Hollywood private eye there. The girl's in love with the television set; besides, I'd say she's going home with the cowboy over by the cigarette machine."

"Oh, how depressing! What makes you say so?" he whined, casting a furtive glance at the man cleaning his fingernails with a hunting knife.

"Because he pulled the knife when you began talking to the girl and he's been cutting your throat ever since. I don't think he appreciates your comments about her breasts."

"Do you suppose he heard?"

"I imagine. You haven't been terribly discreet, you know."

Carl spun his glass nervously, tilted his head back and finished the drink, smiling blandly at the others. "Well," he said, "you fellers ready to go, then? There ain't a woman alive worth getting disfigured over. Period."

"What do you think about that, Constable?" Harry asked as he finished his drink.

"Makes sense to me. I'm ready to go if you are."

Albert excused himself, went to the payphone to call the supplier, arranged to have another horse and tack the following day and returned as we were pushing our empties to the center of the table.

The cowboy slipped the knife into its sheath, tipped his chair forward and leaned on the table as we stood to go. He rose as we reached the door and, as we crossed the parking lot, I turned to see him silhouetted against the dim light from within the bar. Was he just making certain we were leaving or was he trying to determine where we were going so he could arrange a surprise later? Either way, I felt uneasy about the man's sullen scrutiny at our backs but, rather than worry the other needlessly, I kept my thoughts to myself, herded them aboard the motor home, buckled in and fired up the engine.

Carl and Albert thrashed about in the darkness trying to get comfortable, exchanging ideas about the following day in hushed whispers. Harry Collins squirmed into a chair and Tom Cheney buckled into the passenger seat grumbling about not getting any dinner.

Some of my friends—if I still had any—would have had good reason to belittle me had they known what I was planning that cold night in Lowell with four of the most unlikely travelling companions one could choose. They'd have held their sides and collapsed in fits of madness if they thought for a moment I was serious about making a trip on horseback up the canyon to find someone who might not even be the man I was looking for.

In retrospect the idea seemed insane and I reserved the right to cancel the trip at any moment, return to the motor home, or slip away and continue on alone unencumbered by the bumbling quartet. I had enough conflict in my own life and was in no mood to share the laments and gripes of four men to whom I owed nothing.

The trip back to camp was uneventful save for an occasional comment about missing dinner but we all knew they'd survive until morning, then the outfitter would pile their horses with enough provisions to last for a week and the guide

would see that they were well fed and tucked in for the nights.

God, I didn't envy the guide, wouldn't have his job if it was the last one in America.

I had to wake three of them when we arrived at camp where Brandy was hugging a flickering little fire to keep warm. It had taken longer than I thought to get to Lowell and back and I figured she'd be expecting an apology and explanation. Instead, she kissed me lightly after I got everyone headed toward their own rig, then guided me inside.

I turned on the lights and got a flame going under a pot of coffee while she hopped around trying to warm up, then I fetched two cups from the cabinet and sat at the table, pulling her down onto my lap.

"Sorry it took so long," I said as I wrapped my arms around her. "What did you find?"

"Not much," she shrugged, "The door was locked so I had to climb around and look in the windows. They have a lot of computers and some printers, and charts of the river tacked to the walls. There are other things, too. Bottles and little cardboard cartons about this big."

She made a square with her hands about six inches across.

"Little white cartons. Oh, and test tubes. A balance scale. Some butterfly nets and some small wire cages. What do you think?"

I told her I thought they were probably nothing more than what they said they were; environmentalists who were here to survey the river and take samples for the Markham Institute.

She seemed disappointed.

"Were you hoping for more?" I asked.

"No."

"What, then?"

"Nothing."

"No, come on, you're thinking of something; what is it?"

She wrinkled her nose and twisted her head sideways, "It's too perfect," she said, "All arranged in neat little rows and out where I could see them, It's too perfect."

I grinned at her. "They're scientists for crying out loud. That's the way they do things; neat little rows and arranged so they can get at them easily. I don't think that's unusual at all."

"What, four guys who can't cook their own dinner without ruining it should be so neat with bottles and butterfly nets? Richard, the inside of that motor home is spotless! And everything is absolutely perfect."

"Still, Peach, I don't think that's unusual. Some people are great cooks but can't sweep the floor. Others make beautiful comforters but can't cook worth a damn."

"Yeah, you're probably right." She was quiet for awhile, then reached up and turned off the light, wriggling out of her coat and dropping it onto the floor behind her. She slid sideways until she nestled in the crook of my arm, looked up innocently into my eyes.

"I'm freezing," she whispered.

"I can warm you up," I said.

"I know," she smiled.

A minute later, vaguely aware that the

coffee was perking vigorously, I said, "The burner's going."

"Oh, good" she whispered, "so's mine."

THREE

Another noisy argument from our neighbors at the adjacent camp interrupted breakfast the following morning so I pulled the curtain aside to see what was going on this time. Carl was sitting on the bumper of their motor home trying to get his socks and shoes on while Albert berated him for his behavior the previous night.

"Well, how was I to know the broad was his girlfriend?" Carl worried as he tied his shoes and stood defiantly before his boss.

Albert shook his head in disgust. "That's exactly what I mean when I say you're always getting us into trouble. You're uncivilized, rude and obnoxious when you're out in a public place. You have garbage mouth as well; I haven't heard you say a single sentence without swearing or using four-letter words since we began this trip."

"And you," Carl said deliberately, "are a pain in the ass. Why don't you climb off my back?"

I put my hands to the sides of my face and sagged back down beside Brandy. "Oh, God; I want my teddy bear," I moaned.

"What?"

"I said, I have to get ready now."

She pushed away from me and had a sip of coffee. "Why?" she asked.

"I'm going up river with them this morning."

She looked at me for long moments. "To find Calhoun now. Why didn't you tell me last night?"

"I was busy with more important things last night; it didn't seem the right time."

Sighing with exasperation, she rose and headed for the bathroom.

"You don't have to get dressed just because I am," I said.

"I'll fix some trail meals for you. How long will you be gone?"

She came out of the bathroom moments later with her robe tied loosely around her and began searching for food that would be easy for me to prepare on the trail.

"Probably until some time this evening or early tomorrow morning if all goes well. I have no idea where the cabin is, don't know if it's on this side of the river or the other. It may take only a few hours to find it or it may take all day."

She arched an eyebrow at me, "That's it?"

"That's the best I can do, I wish I could say I'll be back this afternoon, but I can't. I'll be here when I get here."

I got dressed, pulling on my thermal underwear, denim trousers, a chambray shirt, heavy socks, riding boots and my black western hat. I felt like a kid going out to play in the snow but knew it would be colder in the mountains, especially at night.

While Brandy finished preparing the meals, I got my P-coat from the closet, shoved the .45 automatic pistol into the right pocket and a box of cartridges into the left, then carried everything up to the front. As I sat down Brandy placed the

packet of food on the table, standing above me with her arms folded across her chest.

"You're not finishing your breakfast?" I asked.

"No. Maybe I'll warm up something after you leave. I want to take a shower first and get dressed. Do you have everything you need?"

"I think the outfitter will have everything we'll need but I'll take the survival kit anyhow. I'll get the pack and bedroll after I finish breakfast. I wish you'd sit with me so we can talk awhile before I go."

Maybe one last look, I thought. The last meal, the last kiss, one last sweet word of love before I ride off to find a man who might kill me.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Richard; I can't this time. I'll get your pack and bedroll ready."

I watched her walk to the rear of the motor home where she began stowing the survival kit into the pack and tightening the bedroll. I put the fork down and stared at the food, sickened by the sight of it and hating what it represented. This could be her last offering to me.

I never thought about dying when I was on an operation but Brandy never quit thinking of it. She knew I might never come back yet she did everything she could to see that I went away as prepared as possible. We rarely exchanged our secret fears and when we did they were brief, intermixed with words of love, promises of better tomorrows and gentle touches.

But there were always tears for she was never able, at the last moment, to prevent them from coming no matter how much we tried to buoy each other for the parting.

Every time I came back I promised I would not leave again. Every time someone turned my promises to lies, so I quit promising. The best I can say is that I will return when I return.

She brought the gear up and dropped it on the floor beside the table. "You haven't finished your breakfast," she said.

"No."

"You should."

"I'm not as hungry as I thought, Peach. I'll eat something later; on the trail."

She took the plate and carefully scraped the food into the trash basket, ran some hot water and began washing the single plate, the single fork; trying to be tough to show me she wasn't worried, proving only that she was.

I looked out the window, saw the others milling about, casting glances my way, then toward the road. It was time to go; the minutes had dwindled away to nothing.

I picked up the gear, draped the P-coat over my arm and stood. Brandy turned toward me wiping her hands on a dish towel, her face pale, eyes dark and somber.

"I love you," she said.

"And I love you."

She kissed me gently, standing slightly away, not touching me too much, as if I were a stranger met on the street, as if she were afraid to touch the cold flesh of someone already dead.

I swung out of the motor home, got

into my P-coat and walked toward the others, not daring to look back for fear my will would fail me and send me rushing back to her arms.

Carl and Albert were still pinging on each other and, as I approached, Carl took my arm and swung me aside.

"Hey, Constable," he bawled, "Albert says I acted like a fool last night in the bar. Do you think something like that is being foolish?"

"You nitwit," Albert growled through his teeth, "you make us look like trash everywhere we go. I'm going to recommend the Institute dismiss you when we get back."

I shrugged Carl's hand away and stepped between then, addressing them both at the same time. "I don't need your troubles at this point in my life, you two. In case you haven't noticed, we live here, too. If you're going to keep this up, do it somewhere else."

"You're right, of course," Albert apologized, "and I promise it won't happen again. Perhaps its the cramped quarters and bad luck that's making us irritable. Once we get on the trail I'm sure we'll lighten up."

Carl snorted contemptuously and climbed onto the picnic table with Harry to wait for the outfitter and the guide. I helped organize their gear and, after getting Carl's grudging promise to hold his temper, I joined them in a discussion of the day's agenda to appease their sour moods.

A few minutes later Tom beckoned to Albert and pointed down the narrow road.

"Looks like a pickup's coming," he said.

Albert peered in the direction of the approaching truck and called the others. "Heads up," he shouted. "I think the outfitter's here."

The truck rumbled up between the motor homes and stopped. In the passenger seat was a lean, wiry, handsome man whom I took to be the guide. He slipped from the truck and glided away to the far end of the camp to wait for the truck carrying the horses and tack.

The driver, a giant of a man, introduced himself as William Jack Wallace. His face was deeply tanned and creased with weathered lines like a skin of used leather. He was dressed for the early morning chill in faded denims, a sheepskin lined jacket with a wool scarf at his neck and black, knee high boots with thick soles. A long, wool stocking cap was pulled down over his head, nearly covering his eyes, and his hands were clad in cracked and blackened leather gloves.

"We tried to make it to the bar in Lowell last night," he said, "but we got busy with arrangements for the grub. Who's the boss here?"

"I am," Albert said, stepping forward and introducing me as if I were one of his buffoons.

"He's tagging along on a project of his own. That be a problem?"

"Not a bit," Wallace said. "Who'll pay for the extra?"

I held up a hand and we had a brief pow wow at the picnic table while I signed his contract and paid the fee. When we were finished he spread his arms wide and ushered us into a circle, explaining his foreman had assembled

and packed all the gear and would arrive straightaway. Then he swept his arm toward Moon and suggested we follow him for introductions.

The guide nodded silently as we introduced ourselves but declined to shake hands with us. The moment the introductions were completed he turned and walked up the incline to wait for the horses. I watched him go, wondering what made any man hungry enough to put up with the likes of Albert Harper and his band of numbskulls.

Moon stood on the hill stiff as a post with his hands in his hip pockets, his well-worn black hat pulled low over his forehead, his eyes shaded by mirrored sun glasses. He wore a faded denim jacket and equally faded but clean denim trousers; his boots, when new, would have cost four hundred dollars. He was a quiet man in a quiet country with the patience to deal with grumbling, boisterous flatlanders.

I envied and pitied him at the same time.

The horses and other gear arrived five minutes later and were unloaded and piled or tethered amid a chorus of shouting and whistling. Wallace gave Albert a list of instructions, reiterated the schedule and timetable and admonished all us to stay close to the guide and heed his advice since he knew the country well. After a brief whispering session with Moon, Wallace bade us farewell and he and the other hired outfitters roared away in a great cloud of dust.

The four environmentalists ran around the horses, patting rumps, making bets as to which of them would fall off their horse first and howling like a bunch of school children at a circus.

I wandered over to the picnic table and sat, shaking my head in disgust at the spectacle of four grown men making such asses of themselves. Moon came over shortly, thumped one booted foot down on the bench, leaned an elbow on his knee, carefully adjusted his sunglasses and thumbed his hat back on his head.

"You don't have much to say, Constable," he said in a voice so soft I had to lean sideways to hear.

"I was thinking the same about you," I replied.

"Well, I have a great deal of trouble relating to metropolitans."

"Yeah, me, too," I said. "More and more as the days go by."

"Ummm," Moon said, ending the conversation and pulling himself up to his full six foot height. He slipped a toothpick from his left breast pocket and clamped it between his teeth, staring blandly at the four scientists.

Presently he pushed his chin toward Boyd's Creek, "Let's take a walk," he said.

I followed him across the road and we wandered up the creek a dozen yards to a concrete spillway where he sguatted to watch the water curl over the debris piled against the wall.

"You reckon there's any gold in this creek, Moon?" I asked as I got down beside him.

"Nope," he said.

"You sound pretty confident about that. Why?"

"Because if there was gold in the creek some white man would have a thirty foot high wall around it with armed

guards and security dogs stationed every ten feet, that's why. Tell me what you're doing up here with that bunch."

The question was so abrupt I had to think a few seconds before I could respond, turning to watch him studying the patterns in the dozen or so separate water falls.

"Well, I wanted to go up river to take some pictures anyhow and I figured it wouldn't hurt to have some company in case I ran into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know. The horse might fall or I might loose my way. That kind of trouble."

He nodded, chewing the toothpick, rolling it back and forth across his tongue. "You always pack a piece when you're out taking pictures?" he asked, nodding toward the bulging P-coat pocket.

"Generally, yes, It's a habit with me."

"Well, these days maybe it isn't such a bad habit. That fellow Harper was real interested about it, by the way."

"That's okay with me," I said. "I'm not trying to hide the fact I have a pistol; if he asks I'll let him see it."

Moon gave me one of those looks that told me he already knew I was only hours away from finding the trouble I'd mentioned. Presently he stood and looked toward the Selway.

"We'd better get back before one of those tinhorns falls in."

Moon stayed a little behind and to my left as we returned to the camp, walking with his head up and his chin out, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, fingers spread and slightly curled, appearing relaxed when I knew he was as tense as a coiled rattler.

The four environmentalists had most of their gear wrapped in slings by the time we walked into camp so we helped secure everything onto the pack horses then selected our mounts. I chose a pinto mare, flipped the stirrup over the saddle to adjust the cinch strap, shortened the stirrups for my comfort and secured my pack and bedroll to the saddle rings. I grabbed the saddle horn to swing up, when Harry Collins yelled and fell to the ground as his horse bolted away.

The four city slickers dropped what they were doing and began chasing the horse across the parking lot and into a stand of small trees.

"Stop!" I screamed. "Don't chase the horse. Just stop."

Everyone stopped and looked at me, wondering what I was trying to do. Moon dropped his horse's reins and came around to watch.

"These are not wild animals," I said. "It will come back in a minute. Just let it settle down and start grazing. Go over there and sit down. Sit. Sit! Sit!"

They sat. I walked slowly toward the horse after it had decided we weren't going to give chase. Five minutes later, it began grazing peacefully under the trees. I approached it from the left side until it raised its head and rolled its ears back. Then I slowly got down on the ground, rolled over on my back and put my hands across my chest.

Another five minutes passed before the horse snorted and wandered over to see what this fool human was doing laying on his back in the grazing patch. It came slowly, head down, ears forward

until its nose was a foot from mine.

I simply reached out and took the rein that was hanging down on my chest.

Moon slapped his thigh and shook his head. The four lunatics jumped up and began dancing and clapping as if the whole thing had been a stage play performed for their enjoyment.

"Where in the hell did you learn how to do that?" Moon asked as I led the horse back to the parking lot.

"Long, long story," said I. "Horses are just curious creatures. Chase 'em and they run away. Lay down and close your eyes and they want to know what you're up to. So they walk over and investigate."

"Impressive," he said. "I'll have to remember that. What would you do if it hadn't had a bridle?"

"Grab its mane and hold on with all four feet."

Moon retrieved his horse, got the others mounted, pressed the pack animals into line and gave us the signal to move out. He led us up the short incline to the road and headed for the bridge a few miles away. I looked back briefly to wave to Brandy but she had drawn the curtains.

Moon sat his sorrel stud gracefully, his left hand on his thigh, the reins held loosely in his right hand as he moved in perfect counterpoint to the swaying of the horse, urging it easily along the road.

After we crossed the bridge, Moon called a halt and came back to suggest I take a position at the rear of the line, explaining the other horses would follow better with me to prod them along when they balked.

I nodded, swung the mare out of the line and fell in behind to a discouraging sight. Harry Collins was just ahead of me, hunched over his saddle with his arms bent, elbows flapping, kicking his legs while he tried to coax the horse into action. Ahead of Harry, Tom Cheney was clinging desperately to his horse's mane with one hand and the saddle horn with the other. One foot had already slipped from the stirrup and he was sliding sideways, to the left, out of the saddle. Carl, ahead of Tom, and Albert, just behind the guide, were not doing too badly handling their horses, although both were clinging to the saddle horns as the we began the slow climb into the forest above the river.

I urged the mare forward to Tom who was now laying across his horse's neck with one arm hooked around the saddle horn to keep from falling off. His butt bounced up and down with every step, his eyes wide with fear, face contorted with pain. I shoved him back to the right, leaned down and slipped his left foot back into the stirrup, handed him the reins, snugging them up to keep the horse's head high, then grabbed him by the coat collar and jerked him upright so he was sitting tall in the saddle.

His eyes, large as quarters, stared straight ahead, his mouth hung open, slack-jawed, and he appeared to be hyperventilating. I rode beside him for awhile until I was certain he wouldn't slide off the saddle again and after a few minutes I figured he had the hang of it.

The next hours were uneventful and strangely quiet as the men concentrated on staying upright and keeping their horses headed in the right direction. We passed the last primitive campsites and got into the forest, following a narrow trail

up into the trees on the moss-covered mountains. The horses settled to an easy pace and the stillness was punctuated only by the occasional cry of a jay, the creaking of leather and the horses' deep, steady breathing.

Moon called a halt just before noon at a location close to the river about a mile and a half above the falls where Albert decided to take some water samples. While the four dipped and scooped and rubbed their butts, squatting awkwardly at the river's edge, Moon tethered the horses then came over to talk to me.

"You've had experience with livestock," he said. "I'm still pretty impressed with your horse trick back there. I'm interested to learn how you figured out a horse would do that. Maybe you could tell me someday."

"I grew up on a farm, Moon," I said. "We had horses. And some cattle. They're naturally curious animals. They spook when you walk into their pastures. All their heads come up at the same time. If you were to crawl in, they would watch but it wouldn't spook them as much. They're used to four-legged things.

"But if you get down on the ground and lay real quiet, pretty soon they'll come over to see how you got from two-legged to no-legged. Finding out was an accident, really. I was on the road not many years back and I happened to choose a pasture to sleep in one evening. Weren't any cows or horses around when I went to sleep but when I woke up the next morning I was surrounded. Hundreds of 'em. And a horse was standing there with its face a foot from mine. It's something you don't forget."

He chuckled. "Well, it'll be good having you along to help with the greenhorns, then. Do you cook?"

I allowed as how I was a pretty fair cook so I got the job, broke out the cooking gear and prepared some fried ham sandwiches, fruit juice and coffee, calling the others up from the river when it was finished.

Moon sat on one side of the small clearing while I sat on the other, watching the four men stomping around, cursing and raising a lot of dust as they complained and rubbed their sore behinds, trying to get comfortable on the rocks or stumps. I told Harry if he spooked his horse again, he was going to have to lay down and wait for it to come back. He thought it was funny, but I was dead serious about it.

Moon cast an appraising eye at the lowering sky while he finished the meal, watching the clouds moving in from the west as the sun was smothered by great, grey thunderheads. After he finished his coffee, he went to his saddlebags to withdraw his slicker, suggesting we do the same before we remounted.

I carried the cooking gear to the river, scrubbed them clean and was back as Moon was prompting the pack horses into line and shoving Tom Cheney onto his saddle. When we were up and ready, he jerked his head and led the way to the narrow trail near the river. The whiskeyjacks and ground squirrels were already policing up the area where the four environmentalists had dropped their food and paper scraps.

Environmentalists? Right.

The trail widened and grew steeper after a half mile, wandering up the side of the mountain to disappear under a tun-

nel of conifer boughs. A fine, misty rain began to fall as we neared the crest, silver drops spiralling down from the high canopy whipped by a fitful breeze, and Albert asked if it might not be a good idea to stop and set up camp.

Moon, silent as a stone statue, merely shook his head and nodded to some hidden place farther along the trail, urging his horse ahead at a canter, throwing the men into fits of complaining dismay as they fought to stay aboard their mounts.

At length we came to a fork in the trail, one path leading down to the river, the other continuing along the ridge. Moon suggested we stay on the ridge because it would be difficult to return if it began raining harder, but Albert, who insisted on going down to the river to make camp for the evening, screamed just loud enough and long enough for Moon to shrug compliance and begin the descent, looking at me and rolling his eyes to heaven.

"Albert," I called. "If you stay on that bar tonight you're going to get wet. See those clouds off to the south? It's raining like hell in those mountains down there!"

"So what," Albert yelled, glancing briefly at the dark sky. "That's twenty or thirty miles from here."

"You aren't too bright for a scientist, Albert," I replied bluntly. "That million gallons of water falling out of the sky down there is what made all these rivers. You stay on that bar and you're going to get wet."

"Well, I make the decisions for the group and I'm telling you we're going to go down to the river to collect more samples. If it begins raining and it looks like the river might flood we'll just come back up here. What's so difficult about that?"

I looked at Moon, expecting an explanation but he sat quietly, hands folded in his lap, and studied the sky. I suspected he was hoping Albert and the others would be drowned in a flash flood so he could go home and have a good meal with some dusky, plump woman.

"Look, Albert," Carl said, "maybe we should... ."

"Shut up! I said we're going down and we're going down!" He glowered at the others, daring them to speak. "Does anyone wish to debate that?"

"I debate and I refuse," I said, then turned to Moon.

"I'm staying up here on the ridge, Moon, and may ride on a ways to take some pictures. You going to take them down?"

"They paid for the tickets so they get to play the game. I can take care of myself."

Meaning: They may not get out if the river floods, but he sure as hell would.

He touched the brim of his hat with two fingers and swung the sorrel away, reassembled the group and headed down to the river, guiding them slowly and carefully on a trail already slick from the mist.

It began raining harder as they neared the river and cold drops pelted me as I reined in and watched to see what they were going to do. The pack horses were in disarray, pulling at the tethers and backing in circles with frightened eyes as the men fought to keep them under control while they clutched their ponchos.

Moon was shouting and waving his arms, trying to surround everyone at the same time as a cold torrent, whipped by strong west winds, began to pound me with stinging blows. Unable to help and already drenched I whirled the mare around and sought high ground as the downpour, already so heavy I was unable to see the five men below, precipitated a cascade of mud and debris from the mountainside. It grew quickly into a broad rumble of tree limbs, rocks, boulders and topsoil, sweeping away toward the river in boiling eddies. The Selway churned with mud loosened from the banks and I watched the growing storm with alarm, wondering if I should turn back to help the others or go on to find shelter.

I knew it would be impossible for them to climb back to the ridge until the storm subsided. At the same time I knew, even if it was the perfect time to strike out on my own, finding Calhoun's cabin might take hours or days longer than I expected if the trail became impassable.

Soaked, freezing, and tired of fighting the mare, I had no time to worry about the others. I urged her ahead and began looking for shelter out of the rain, riding blindly until I found a place where a stand of cedars had fallen from a rocky promontory, forming a natural lean-to over the entrance to a shallow depression. As I approached, I saw it would provide some protection from the storm, coaxed the stumbling mare in under a sheet of falling water and dismounted.

I lashed my canvas ground cover to the branches overhead to keep out the wind-whipped rain, shook the water from my poncho and coat, hung them on a branch and went to work getting a grudging, smoky fire started.

God's unmerciful fist, I thought dismally as I pulled the saddle, blanket and bridle from the mare; what incredibly bad luck has brought me to this?

Although I'd planned to leave the others and go on alone to find Calhoun, I was dismayed at having been separated so suddenly without having time to ask Moon if he knew of a cabin on this side of the Selway. What if I couldn't find it? What if it took days instead of the hours I'd hoped? The pack horses laden with the food and supplies may have broken away from the group during the sudden deluge and, even though I had a few scant meals in the survival kit Brandy had packed, I knew they wouldn't last more than a day or two even with the most frugal rationing.

I cursed, angry with myself for leaving camp so ill prepared. If the storm lasted more than a day I'd be forced to return to Boyd's Creek, try to find the necessary maps and rations and resume the search later. I could do that properly prepared but how long would it take? Weeks? Months? I couldn't wait that long, didn't want to leave Brandy alone at camp while I stumbled around looking for Dallas Calhoun.

I hobbled the mare, stripped, fished an almost-dry towel from the pack and dried myself, shivering and hopping around trying to stay warm. When I finished, I dressed in dry, clean clothes then used the towel to dry the mare, rubbing her down and trying to calm her with reassuring words.

When she was as dry as I could manage, I pulled a blanket from the bedroll

and tossed it over her, patting her gently and pushed her back into the protection of the shallow cave.

I shrugged my poncho over my shoulders and squatted at the entrance behind the fall of water to stare grimly at the growing storm. I'd escaped the hazards of the mud slide and, for that, I was grateful to whatever gods look after fools like me. But what about Brandy two or three miles down the river? Our camp was well above the water level but the surge, the debris and boulders sweeping past with force might damage the motor home or carry her away to her death.

What a stupid fool I am, I thought. Finding Calhoun suddenly became unimportant as thoughts of Brandy filled my mind. Nothing would be worth losing her and, if I did, nothing I could ever do after that would take away the regret I'd have for leaving her alone while I wandered off to do something that was really none of my business.

The others, if still alive on the crumbling bank of the river, might already be planning a return to camp. If I could alert them we might be able to join up again and be back before morning. Moon would probably wait until the storm abated then herd the sodden group along the shore toward civilization.

I raged silently, listening to the thunder pounding along the ridges, the waterfall booming at the entrance to the shelter and the frightened stirring of the pinto behind me. Never in my life had I been so aware of my aloneness and helplessness. What could I have been thinking to believe I could wander around this hostile country as though I were on a leisurely stroll along the Embarcadero? This wasn't San Diego Bay and home wasn't just across the Coronado Bridge; this was desolate God-forsaken wilderness where a man could die or be killed any number of causes, man-made or otherwise.

A slip on the rocks and a broken leg could mean certain death out here and if the mare bolted and ran away I'd have to walk out no matter how long it might take. There might be cougars up here, or bears; all sorts of dreadful beasts that could chomp off an arm or leg and mutilate a man so badly he'd bleed to death before he could find a way to mend the wounds.

I retrieved my sopping coat and filched through the pockets until I found the pistol and the cartridges, fumbling with it until I had a single round loaded, then went to the entrance to fire a shot into the air, hoping to raise a response from the others six hundred feet below in the canyon.

The explosion echoed off the boulders, spooked the mare into a frenzied dance as she struggled with the hobble, threatening to break free and bolt down the hillside.

I shoved the pistol into my belt and grabbed for her, twisting my fingers in her mane and pressing her against the rocks until she settled into a nervous trembling with her eyes rolled back and her nostrils flared. She snorted and balked, tossing her head and shivering until I calmed her long minutes later.

When she was quiet I shoved the .45 into the saddlebag, returned to the entrance and looked westward trying to assess the storm. The sky was leaden from horizon to horizon, the heavy thunder-

heads enveloped the mountain like a dark, icy shroud, scudding eastward, carrying the storm toward Wyoming.

I gathered a meager supply of damp wood, stacking it around the sputtering fire to dry and sat on the saddle, hugging the flame and nodding restlessly through the long hours of evening and into the night. Numbed witless by the cold, I could do little more than push sticks at the fire while the sound of water, falling from the overhanging rocks, pounded in my head.

FOUR

An hour before sunrise the rain suddenly stopped as though by some prearranged signal it was decided the day should be fair. A cool wind blew up out of the canyon, whipping the narrow waterfall into a fine, misty spray and by the time I'd saddled the mare and secured my pack and bedroll, it was reduced to a few slanting silver arrows reflected in the rising sun.

Unable to locate the others but determined to find them or, at the least to survive and return to camp, I urged the mare back along the muddy trail, sidetracking far out of the way so she would not fall.

After twenty agonizing minutes, during which time the horse slipped and stumbled on the rain-sodden stones and mud, I arrived at the point above the river where I had last seen the other five members of the group. There was no sign of them and no evidence they had ever been there, the tracks having been completely obliterated by the mud slide. Although it seemed hopeless the others could have made it to the ridge during the storm, it was possible they might have followed the shore down river to a point where they could find some shelter among the rocks.

The level of the river had risen only slightly and I thought it likely the camps below the falls, where the river was broader, would not have been flooded. I was satisfied that, although things might have got wet at Boyd's Creek, there would be no real damage and Brandy had been in no real danger, convincing myself she was fine, had the intelligence to get things put away when it began raining, and I had nothing to worry about.

It was my way of justifying going on to look for Calhoun.

I tried shouting in an attempt to arouse the others but that set the mare to dancing again and I nearly spun out of the saddle before I could calm her. Firing another shot would be out of the question entirely.

The slope below was treacherous; muddy rivulets flowing down the mountain and cold droplets spinning from the trees above had kept it impassable. It was unthinkable to try to ride down to find their trail so I decided to ride on, following the river and see if they had found a way to the ridge farther up stream.

I was torn between a desire to go on, despite the danger and lunacy of doing so, and a desire to return to camp to report the party's misfortune. Of the two, however, returning to camp was the least desirable option for I was loathe to admit defeat so early in the chase.

I determined, then, to wait another thirty minutes and, if no one appeared, to continue up river to look for a place where they might have found a way to return to the crest. If I failed to find such a

trail or if the trail was present but impassable, at least I'd be that much closer to Calhoun's cabin and I could continue on foot if necessary.

With the mare tethered to a cedar and the pistol reloaded and safely stowed in the saddlebag, I sat wearily on a boulder to wait.

How time is distorted when one finds himself in such a predicament, I thought, glancing at my watch for the fifth time and finding only minutes had passed rather than the hours it seemed. At the end of the thirty minutes, I remounted and swung the mare around to follow the river when I spotted a trio of riders approaching from up stream. Thinking they were members of our party I nudged the mare ahead, keeping her in the duff at the high side of the trail where the footing was better but, as I drew near, I saw it was another party headed back toward the ranger station at the falls.

"Hot damn, what a night!" one of them shouted with exhilaration as they reined in. "Did you get caught out here during the storm?"

"Yeah," I said. "I spent the night under some trees back there. The rest of my group was down at the edge of the river when it began to rain and I haven't seen them since. Is there a way up to the ridge back there?"

The leader of the group, a big man with a brown, creased face, twisted in his saddle and pointed up the river.

"They's a switchback up there about a mile. It's awful wet and slippery but they could make it up if they take it easy. It's about three, four hundred feet down to the river at that point. Beyond that, maybe half a mile, is a rest camp with a shed and dry wood if they wuz lucky enough to make it that far. Water and hay for the horses, too. Ain't no food, though."

He appraised the slope down to the river and shook his head grimly. "That was a hell of a rain; they'd be lucky if they wuzn't swept into the river what with the mud and all."

"Are there any cabins beyond the rest camp on this side of the river?" I asked, hoping to get a fix on Calhoun's place.

The man studied me intently for a moment, his eyes narrowed and his head cocked slightly to one side as he sized me up.

"Just one," he said finally. "Feller lives there is friendly enough but he don't welcome company much. He's a little tetched, I think. He won't feed you or let you spend the night. It's about four mile beyond the rest camp high up on the side of the mountain, maybe four, five hundred feet."

I thanked him and swung the mare away when one of the other men asked how I'd got separated from the group.

"They went down to the river before it began raining but I stayed on top to take some pictures," I explained. "When the storm hit I headed for shelter, found a place where some trees had fallen and waited there all night. I looked for them this morning, waited back there about half an hour but I haven't been able to raise them for love or money."

"Fire a shot at 'em," one of them offered. "That'll get their attention."

"Tried that. Nearly spooked the horse into running off. Tried yelling, too, with the same result. I think I'll go on to the

rest camp and wait; maybe someone will show."

"You might have a long wait," the leader said. "It ain't likely they could travel real fast with the water up and it'd take 'em hours to reach the switchback. Where's your base camp?"

"Boyd's Creek."

"We're headed that way if you went to tag along. It's a sight closer than that cabin up on the mountain."

"No, thanks," I said. "I believe I'll go to the rest camp and wait; if the others don't show up by this afternoon, I'll make my way back."

"Suit yourself," the big man said, urging his horse ahead. "Mind the fireplace; they's some loose stones up at the roof."

I waved acknowledgment, watched them go, then wheeled the mare and followed their trail up river to the switchback. It was steep and muddy, littered with limbs and debris washed down by the rains and, while there were no tracks leading up from the river, it appeared passable so I figured the others could make it if they got this far.

From the crest the view of the canyon was incredible. Cedar forests stretched away on all sides as far as the eye could see, with the gentle curve of the river angling away to the south under sun-split clouds, patches of brilliant blue above curtains of silver fog, sundogs glowing at the edges. To the east the sun crept above the trees and crimson firebrands swept to the zenith.

Fronds of fern, set in mounds of emerald moss, dripped tiny jewelled raindrops and wildflowers drooped like a sodden carpet under the heavy canopy of the forest.

I squatted on my haunches with my back to a cedar watching the clouds sailing eastward, hearing the sigh of wind in the conifers, they swaying like the masts of tall ships; the scolding crack of a jay from somewhere down the canyon, the plunk and tink of water falling through the branches all around me.

Chief Joseph had wept when he led his people from this land to a safe haven in Canada. It was easy to see why.

Twenty minutes later I rose, arching the stiffness from my neck and shoulders as the mare stomped the ground behind me, shivering sway the droplets falling from the trees.

Knowing the trip across the ridge would consume most of the daylight hours and reluctant to ride after the light failed, I remounted and began the slow journey over the treacherous trail.

I arrived at the rest camp with less than an hour of light remaining, stripped and rubbed the mare, tossed a blanket over her and shoved a bale of hay into the corral.

Dragging my gear inside, I found a small, rough, one room wooden shelter with a wooden bed frame, a small table with a single chair and a battered galvanized bucket on a wooden peg beside a large stone fireplace. I put the gear on the table, stepping over the puddles of water that had leaked in during the storm, dug out the survival kit and found some waxed matches to get a fire going.

Enough dry wood had been stacked against a far corner to last a night or two, so I cracked off some bark for punk, added small sticks for kindling and had

a cozy fire up in less than three minutes.

The survival kit which Brandy and I packed for emergencies usually contained a small jar of Yuban instant coffee, dry soup mixes, crackers, chocolate, powered milk, two mess kits and a small medical bag. By removing one of the mess kits she had managed to squeeze in a small can of Spam, a package of French rolls and a dozen sandwich bags.

While the fire burned down to coals, I broke out the mess kit, sliced and fried the Spam for six fat sandwiches, then made a cup of reconstituted milk with water skimmed from a rain barrel outside.

Now I m not too crazy about the taste of reconstituted milk, having had more than my share of it in Southeast Asia, but those Spam sandwiches tasted like prime steaks when roasted crisp over the open fire.

I fed the fire while I ate two of the sandwiches, packed the rest in the survival kit then spread my bedroll on the wooden platform and went outside to fetch a bucketful of water to heat for a bath.

It was dark under the trees by the time I was finished with only a faint glow lingering in the sky far to the west.

The wind, wet and cold, shushed across the tops of the cedars, loosening cones to rattle down through the branches and bounce off the tin roof. Water, trapped on the roof at the corner of the loose chimney stones, plunked onto the bare wooden floor beside the hearth, missing the battered bucket by half an inch.

I sat in the sagging chair staring at the sputtering fire and wishing Brandy could be with me, hoping I could bring her to the cabin under more pleasant circumstances. I wondered how she was doing, hoped she wasn't too worried about me; hoped, too, the storm hadn't damaged the motor home or carried away any of our gear.

I thought of the cabin four miles away where Calhoun might be hiding and wondered if going on was worth the effort.

When the fire was out and my eyes began to ache from staring into the darkness, I felt my way to the bed, sank into the cool pile of the bedroll and closed my eyes.

*****

"Who are you?" Albert asked.

"I'm an assassin," I answered. "I've come to kill Calhoun."

"You can't," he said. "Calhoun is already dead. Go back to your camp."

Several other people dragged stones into a circle near a small fire so they could sit and listen. Flames danced on their faces; embers glowed behind their mysterious eyes.

"Calhoun cannot be dead," I protested. "I am sent to kill him. Bring him out so I may see him with my own eyes."

"He is not here; we have taken him away."

Albert smiled and ragged weeds grew from his teeth, falling down his chin like a living beard. He touched me with a cold, wet hand and when he took it away my arm began to smoulder and burn. I crawled to a small pool beside the fire and thrust my arm, hissing and steaming, into the water.

"That's a good little fire, boy," Albert

said, washing his hands in the pool. "Where are you from?"

"That house there on the hill," I answered but when I turned to point toward it the house was gone and in its place I saw a statue of Calhoun, twenty feet high, lashed to a cross.

Allison Haniford rose from the pool and held out her hands to me, offering me a gun. A serpent uncoiled from her mouth and spoke with her voice, the words appearing on the tip of the black, writhing tongue.

"Can you shoot Calhoun?" it asked.

"Yes," I answered. "My guide showed me how."

"Who is your guide?" snaky Allison asked.

"His name is Cat-Against-The-Moon."

"Is he armed?" Tom Cheney whispered.

"He has a knife," I said.

"Will he use it to kill Calhoun?"

"Calhoun cannot be killed," I sighed. "He is made of stone; see there on the hill? He was killed and now he is made of stone and cannot be killed."

Allison's eyes filled with tears and she began to swim in circles in the tiny pool. "He is killed and yet he lives and cannot be killed," she wailed.

I looked up at the cross on the hill. Calhoun smiled at me and I began to weep with Allison, so desolate was she, so sad. She dove beneath the water and I could see her looking back at me, weeping and wiping her eyes. Her skin shimmered like a gold fish, scales rippling in luminous streamers, her hair billowing away like kelp caught in an undertow. She rose to the surface, cupping her hands, offering me water.

"Want some of this, Richard?" she asked, suddenly smiling.

"I will take it to Calhoun," I said. "He thirsts."

We looked at Calhoun, smiling on the cross. "Yes, I thirst," he said. "I thirst."

"Let us kill him and divide his raiments," Allison hissed.

"His raiments are made of stone," I puzzled, "how are we to divide stone?"

"He has his true raiments hidden from us," Albert whispered behind me. "They are inside the stone."

"Let us kill him, then," Tom Cheney laughed, "and divide the stone."

"Divide his raiments!" Allison insisted.

"I will take him water first," Albert said. He took it from Allison's hands, drank a tiny bit and passed it around. "That's good water," Albert whimpered. "He doesn't deserve it."

"I thirst," said Calhoun from the cross on the hill.

"Fine water," Tom said cupping a dram to his lips.

"Too good for him!" Allison spat, dashing the water to the ground, casting a serpent eye at the hated Calhoun.

I rose from beside the pool and walked up the hill to the cross where Calhoun nodded in the noonday sun.

"They want to divide your raiments," I said.

"Take them, then," he answered, breaking off a portion of a finger and dropping it to me. "But remember me to my disciples, won't you?"

I carried the finger back, kneeling

reverently beside the fire and the others watched in silence while I tore the finger into portions and passed them around. Allison offered more water which had turned red as blood.

"This is the blood of Calhoun," we intoned as we sipped the water from her red-stained hands.

"Remember me to my disciples," Calhoun called down from the hill.

"This is the body of Calhoun," we murmured in unison, grinding pieces of the stone between our teeth. It tasted, I thought, remarkably like Spam on French bread.

"I faint, I faint; the darkness covers my eyes," Calhoun wept from the cross and his head lolled down upon his chest of stone.

"Is he dead, then?" Albert asked, washing his hands in the pool.

"I will see," I replied as I rose and walked to the great stone Calhoun lashed to the great stone cross on the great stone mountain.

"Are you dead yet?" I asked.

"I cannot die for I am made of immortal stone," Calhoun winked at me with a great stone eye.

"He is not dead!" I shouted down to the others.

"Poke him with a sharp stick!" Allison shrieked, thrashing wildly about in the tiny pool.

"Shall I poke you with a stick, then?" I asked the smiling immortal stone Calhoun.

"You may if you wish, Richard," he whispered conspiratorially, "but it will not harm me. I cannot die, you know."

"I know," I responded, jabbing him with a cedar branch until it broke.

"Is he dead yet?" Albert called from the pool.

"Yes," I lied. "He is dead; what shall I do now?"

I looked up at Calhoun who was trying not to laugh.

"What shall I do now?" I whispered.

"Divide my raiments, of course."

"But where are they?"

"Inside where they belong. Roll the stone away; there, between my feet." He wiggled his toes, pointing the way inside.

I rolled the heavy stone to one side and Calhoun became a two story white clapboard house in the suburbs of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

"Is this the house where I was born?" I asked, stepping inside.

"No," said the white clapboard house, "it is where you died."

"It seems so like the house where I was born," I argued, examining my body to see if I had died while I was not paying attention. "Why have you brought me here?"

"To divide my raiments."

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Oh, everywhere. Seek and ye shall find; ask and it shall be given; knock and...oh, well, Richard, you know."

"Will there be enough to share?" I asked, looking for evidence of the raiments so eagerly sought.

"Oh, my, yes," replied the house, shaking with laughter. "Why, there are millions and millions, even billions, I imagine." And it began to shake, raining millions and millions, even billions of green American one hundred dollar

raiments down on me from the ceiling.

*****

I awoke to the startled cry of a jay, saw the rough walls and tin ceiling and leaped from the hard bed, unable for a moment to remember where I was, clawing the air with outstretched hands, still lost in the nightmare as I waited for the house to smother me with hundred dollar bills. Then, suddenly aware of reality, I stood stupidly in the center of the tiny room and shook myself awake.

Stumbling back to the bed, I sat, only to find the bedroll sopping wet. A cold drop hit me on the back and I looked up. Water, condensed under the tin roof, had fallen like dew all night, ruining the blanket and turning the wooden bed box into a tiny pool.

I clutched the sides of my head with both hands, groaning with dismay. "What the unholy hell am I doing here?" I screamed at the damp floor. "I don't need this!"

Agonizing to my feet, I found a towel and dried off while I got a fair fire thumping on the grate. I hung the blanket and bedroll over the table and chair and pulled them up to the hearth to dry, scrounging in the survival kit for the Spam sandwiches. I unwrapped one and propped it against the side of the firepit to toast while I wormed into my icy clothes.

"Okay, Richard," I said to myself. "It's been a rough trip. You got separated from the others and you don't have enough food to keep a bird alive. Your blanket is soaked and your bedroll is ruined. You're wet and cold and tired, but you can make it. You've been through a hell of a lot worse than this, and you can make it. You got out of Vietnam and you can get out of this. Civilization is just over the hill, just two days away, so you're not going to starve.

"Squeeze the water from your blanket and go stand by the fire. No! Save energy, save body heat; go sit by the fire. Get a pair of dry socks and warm up your boots. Eat your sandwich before it burns to a crisp. Get some water from the rain barrel and make a cup of coffee but think before you walk outside, before you do something stupid and get yourself killed."

I sat, propped my feet on the table and leaned back in the chair, groaning from the pain in my back and legs, trying to rub the stiffness from my neck and shoulders while I clamped the sandwich between my teeth.

It tasted odd, I thought; gritty, as if it were full of sand.

I smelled like a wet horse blanket. I wanted to take a hot shower and brush my teeth. I wanted to pack my gear and walk back to Boyd's Creek, fearing that if I sat the horse another day my ass would go permanently numb. I wanted to see Brandy, pat her fanny and kiss her for an hour or so, throw all our gear into the motor home and go someplace where it was warm and no one ever heard of Dallas Houston Calhoun or the agency.

That's what I wanted to do and that's what I should have done, of course. But I didn't. After I warmed up and the blanket and bedroll had dried, after my belly was full and everything was packed for the trip, I walked out to saddle the horse then headed up the mountain toward Calhoun's cabin, knowing every step was in the wrong direction, but powerless to

turn around and end the madness then and there.

FIVE

I stopped at a rise above the cabin four miles beyond the rest camp at two o'clock in the afternoon after a long, agonizing trip along the ridge, across a wide, swampy meadow, and up the side of the wooded mountain. The mare was played out, huffing great clouds of steam into the cold air, so I tied her to some low shrubs and walked to the edge of the forest, looking down at a cluster of dark sheds sequestered in a small clearing beyond. The cabin occupied a forty foot square at the far side of the clearing and there was a storage building and an outhouse just at the edge of the forest. Although the corral was empty, no vehicles were visible and I could hear no sounds of machines or human activity. Smoke drifted from the stone chimney, indicating someone was around.

Standing at the edge of the hill I scanned the area toward the cabin. According to the information we'd received, Calhoun was here, alone, and living like a hermit in this rough-hewn house under the pines.

The pinto grazed for thirty minutes or so while I watched the cabin for signs of activity, then I led her down the gentle slope into the clearing. I'd given some thought to leaving the mare in the thicket and sneaking up to the rear of the cabin using the corral and shed as cover, but figured if Calhoun or whomever lived there saw me creeping around with a drawn pistol I'd probably end the day fertilizing a plot on the hillside and I had better plans for my future. If Calhoun was hiding here and watching out the windows as I approached, I didn't want him to shoot me before I had a chance to ask him if he stole the millions of dollars from Fourney's camp.

Mustering up my resolve, I strolled right into the compound, tied the mare to a corral post, walked around to the front porch and knocked on the door like I was there after an uncle who had gone missing.

No one responded and I could hear no sounds from within so I peeked in the windows and tried to listen through the thick log walls, then walked to the back. The blinds were up and the door was ajar so I poked my head in, knocking, and yelled a couple of times.

Nothing. I was backing out when Calhoun's unmistakable smooth Texas drawl stopped me cold.

"What do you want?" he asked.

I stiffened, expecting a bullet in the back, turning my head from side to side as I attempted to locate him. I could hear a rustling in the brush as something moved to the left, then quiet.

"Just stay where you are and keep your hands where I can see them," he said, closer now. "No, don't look around or I'll drop you where you stand."

I waited—it seemed forever—with my heart pounding, as soft footsteps approached from the storage shed. I was nearing the point I feared I'd black out from holding my breath when something hard poked me in the back.

"Got a gun?" he asked near my right ear.

I pointed to my right pocket.

"No, no. You take it out. Thumb and

one finger; you know how to do it."

I eased the .45 from the pocket, holding it by the butt like a dead frog and he took it quickly, then stepped away chambering a round.

"Okay," he said. "Turn around. Slow."

He was holding the pistol level with my nose when I got around to face him. His eyes widened and a thin smile split his whiskered face.

"Constable! Well, kiss my foot," he said, lowering the Colt. "Richard! What the hell are you doing up here?"

He eased the hammer down, popped the clip, ejected the cartridge and handed the pistol back to me, smiling laconically as he waved the walking stick he'd poked into my back.

I studied him carefully. He stood before me dressed in tattered denim trousers and sheepskin-lined denim jacket with heavy, torn boots on his feet. He was unshaven and his hair, though clean, was long and ragged; his skin creased and weathered from too much exposure to sun and wind. He'd aged a lot since I'd last seen him but the fire was still there behind his eyes, dark under the brim of his western hat. He was still a dangerous man capable of just about anything.

I was so astonished to find he was apparently neither concerned nor angry I had found him that I was unable to answer. I shoved the pistol into my pocket awkwardly and shrugged.

He motioned toward the mare, suggesting I get the saddle off, bathe and rub her down before she dropped dead. I looked at the mare, back to him, and nodded. He studied me for a moment as though I had a tree growing from the side of my head, turned and poled himself to the storage shed where he fetched a bucket and a sponge.

"You gonna say something, or what?" he asked when he returned.

"Sure. Thanks." I took the bucket and headed for the horse.

"I've got beer inside if you're thirsty."

"That'd be fine."

He limped to the house and I watched him go, wondering if he would emerge with an automatic weapon to saw me in half but when he reappeared he had two long neck bottles of Canadian beer and an arm load of towels for drying the mare. He hung the towels over the rail and handed me one of the bottles of warm Moosehead beer. He seemed unconcerned and off guard, certainly not the actions of a man who should have been expecting a visitor. Then I realized he was holding the walking stick like a cudgel, ready to smash my skull if I moved too quickly in the wrong direction. He was strong and quick and could have bashed me stupid if he had a mind to do it.

He sat on the edge of the watering trough with the stick across his lap, sucking on the beer and watching me wash the pinto. Presently he spoke.

"Where's Brandy?"

"Down at the falls. We're camped there."

"She's camped there while you came looking for me."

"Yeah. Look, I wasn't sure you'd be here; I just followed the instructions."

"What instructions?"

"The instructions in the letter you sent while I was in the hospital."

"I didn't send any letter, Richard."

"Sure you did. An orderly handed it to me the day I checked out."

"I didn't send any letter, Richard," he said again.

When I didn't answer he pursed his lips and nodded his head as though he thought I might have come up the mountain to kill him.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he said around the mouth of the bottle.

After I finished cleaning and feeding the horse he stood and waved the stick toward the cabin, falling in beside me as we headed for the back door. Inside, he pulled up a chair and motioned me to sit opposite him at the table, then fetched another warm beer from the pantry. He pried off the top and slid it to me, clapping me on the shoulder and smiling.

"Make yourself at home," he said. "I'll get out of my coat and we'll talk. Where's Brandy?"

"At our camp below the falls," I explained again, wondering why he couldn't remember having asked me the same question only minutes earlier. "How'd you know I was out there?"

"I was up on the hill cutting wood for the fireplace when I spotted you clumping through the brush. Didn't know it was you, though. You should be ashamed of yourself getting bushwacked like that." He hung his jacket on a peg near the fireplace then sat to face me.

"What's with the pistol?" he asked.

"Oh, just force of habit, I guess. I don't feel properly dressed without it when I'm out here in the boonies. Besides, some hunter might mistake me for a deer and I wanted to be able to shoot back if it came to that," I explained lamely.

"Deer season's not for a couple of months and you know it. I reckon you figured I might be the one to take the shot at you. What do you think of the place?"

"What?"

"The cabin; what do you think of it?"

I looked around. The walls were rough logs chinked with mortar and the open ceiling showed rough sawn roof boards covered with cedar shingles. The floors were unvarnished tongue and groove pine covered here and there with hand braided rugs, some frayed at the edges. The fireplace was made of rubble stone with a thick, broad mantle of unfinished pine. A few lithographs hung on the walls, stained by smoke from the fireplace, and a .44 caliber Kentucky flintlock hung on pegs jutting from the chimney. The table was rough pine as were the kitchen cabinets and living room furniture. Only the kitchen chairs in which we were sitting were finished furniture manufactured elsewhere.

The windows were small and hinged drop doors were suspended above each by steel cables rigged through pulleys. Like the thick walls, those doors, when lowered into place over the windows, would stop anything smaller than an antitank missile.

A short hallway led to two small bedrooms adjacent to the living room. Through one open door I spotted an unmade bed piled high with comforters and wrinkled clothing. If I didn't know for truth who I was talking to, anyone would have a tough time convincing me it was the Dallas Calhoun I used to know.

"Well, it's a cabin, for sure," I said. "Is this what you had in mind all those years when you were planning your es-

cape from the agency?"

"Not exactly, but it'll do for now. A year or two more, maybe, if I can keep my name out of the papers. You should have brought Brandy."

"She'll be along in a day or two, I imagine, if I don't get back."

Calhoun nodded solemnly, his eyes searching mine for more than I was telling him. "What brings you up here, Richard?" he asked. "How did you find me?"

"I already told you, Dallas; I followed the instructions in the letter some guy gave me at the hospital. Actually I wasn't sure you'd be here."

"Right," he said, meaning he knew I did. "I must be losing my touch; I thought I'd covered all my tracks. That's worrisome. If you can find me, anybody can; not meaning any disrespect to you. Did the agency send you?"

"You know they didn't. I would have thought you'd leave the country, Calhoun; why did you come up here?"

He grimaced and shrugged. "Because I expected everyone else to think I'd left the country. I tried to make it look that way, you know."

"Yes, I know. Helen and the kids are in Europe living with different names under the protection of someone who will let you know from time to time how they're getting on."

"From time to time," he said as his eyes darkened with an unspoken sadness. "Not often enough."

I sipped the warm beer, told him about the letter and asked if he'd ever heard from Allison Haniford. Then I mentioned the theft of the millions of dollars from the operation in Washington State and admitted I'd been curious enough to come looking for some answers.

He just stared at me without uttering a word. I thought he was going to cry.

At times he seemed lucid; others he seemed distracted and confused as though he couldn't hold onto a thought long enough to analyze it. He was concerned that I'd found him but accepted my lame explanation with little question.

He must have known people from the agency might be looking for him but he seemed not to care. He walked around in the trees chopping wood for the fireplace giving little or no thought to the idea that he'd be a perfect target out there for someone with a high-powered rifle.

I know how loneliness can breed complacency, how it can make a person's thoughts turn inward while ignoring the reality of the world. I know how it can sublimate the primordial instincts for survival and leave one susceptible to capture or death. The need for any kind of companionship, no matter how brief or inane, prevents a person from thinking rationally, although it might cost them their life.

Calhoun had escaped from the agency only to find himself a hostage in a prison of his own making. He was both warden and prisoner, jailer and jailed.

"If you're so damned miserable, Calhoun, I can't figure out why you did this." I waved an arm at the room. "It doesn't make any sense to lose your family, to lose contact with the world, to hide out here in the middle of nowhere just to get away from the agency. Why didn't you go to Europe with Helen? Or to the

Riviera? Anything but this! I figured you had several million dollars with you when you vanished; why didn't you use it to buy a villa in France or set yourself up with a decent life?"

Calhoun twisted sideways and leaned an arm on the table staring at the front door for awhile as though he expected someone to knock on it any moment. Presently he turned back to me and wagged his head, clearing out the errant thought he found inside.

"Never mind," he said to himself. "It's stuffy in here, Richard. Let's go out and sit on the porch." He got his coat and walked to the door so I grabbed the beer and followed him.

Two metal chairs were pushed up against the wall and a weather-beaten wooden swing creaked in the wind at the far end of the porch. He unfolded the chairs, pushed one to me and sat in the other so he was facing the trees. He was quiet for awhile, pulling his lower lip and studying the space beneath the pines toward the river.

"You know," he said at length, "I really didn't expect things to turn out the way they did when I made my decision to get out, Richard. I talked about leaving the agency for a couple of years before I actually got the nerve to try it. It isn't easy to do, as you can see, and as you will someday discover."

"Already discovered," I said.

"Right. No matter how well you think you have things covered, someone will always find you. You found me; other will find me just as easily now. I'm surprised to find I don't care anymore."

He rambled on for awhile about how easy it must have been for me to track him down, admitting he'd stumbled onto the fifty-four billion dollars hidden in the bunker on Colonel Fourney's property and how he'd made the decision then to use the money to get himself out of the agency once and for all. But slowly he began to narrow his thoughts, drifting easily backward, focusing on his life as a kid in Van Horn, Texas and the years when he attended law school in Boston.

He seemed eager to talk so I let him, unwilling to interrupt. He lapsed into a trancelike state yet remained alert to movements in the trees and my presence only a few feet away. He slipped into the past while remaining in touch with the present. So completely did he slip into his past life that I actually expected him to vanish with a little pop of air at any moment. It was chilling and for a time I thought he might be quite mad.

"Except for a few people at the agency, no one knows this, Richard; what I'm about to tell you. Not even Helen. This is a piece of my life I've kept in here." He touched his forehead with trembling fingers. "How I joined the agency. Why I stayed as long as I did. Why I decided to leave. Have you ever been to Van Horn, Texas?"

I told him I had, several times.

"Right, then you know it isn't exactly a mecca of opportunity. A quiet little town in the high desert out in west Texas with a railroad track, a stretch of freeway and a few blocks of main street with some stores and motels.

"Okay, there's more than that, I know, but that's all I could see when I was a kid. I was born there and I grew up there and I knew damned well I was going to die

there if I didn't do something intelligent to get myself out.

"I ran away when I was fifteen years old. Not because of anything wrong at home, you understand. Because of something wrong up here." Again, he touched his forehead.

"My mother died when I was six years old and my father never remarried so I didn't have a mother when having a mother counted, you see. Did I tell you my father was a cabinet maker?"

I nodded, not bothering to tell him I'd read it in his dossier back at the agency the previous year.

"I loved my father; he was a good man and he tried to do everything he could to teach me the cabinet business. And I wanted to please him so I learned how to build cabinets. But going to school all day and building cabinets in the evenings and on weekends wasn't my idea of Utopia when I was fifteen years old, you know?

"I guess I just got tired of it and it made me crazy watching my father kill himself to pay the rent and feed us. I had a sister; did I tell you that? She was struck by a car, killed one day on her way home from school. The driver was drunk. He was rich, owned a lot of oil property, and his lawyer made a deal with my father not to prosecute if he'd settle out of court for a substantial amount of money.

"I'm not sure what happened during those horrible months because I left home, I ran away. I've always regretted having done that because I realized later how much my father needed me at that time and I wasn't there to help him through his grief. Mother died then Ann was killed. I was too young to understand about my mother, but my sister's death affected me terribly. And I was too torn by my own selfish grief to understand the agony my father was suffering. When he needed me most, I ran away.

"Jumped a freight train one night with nothing but the clothes on my back and fifty-seven dollars in my pocket. My life savings, the entire testimony of my having worked in the cabinet shop for more than a year and a half.

"I landed in Santa Fe, New Mexico where I looked for a job. There were none, of course, for a fifteen year old tinhorn like me, so I hitched a ride up to the Grand Canyon. It was late summer and I'd left home without a jacket. It was still ninety degree days in Van Horn, but it was colder'n hell in the mountains around the Grand Canyon. I nearly froze to death sleeping in rest rooms at truck stops and trying to make those few dollars last as long as I could.

"It was pitiful, Richard. I was pitiful. Life was pitiful. I wanted to kill someone and die all at the same time. I contemplated suicide, thinking my death would somehow make a statement against the injustice of a system that allowed a rich drunk to buy his way out of manslaughter. That's what he did, you know.

"By the time I had the good sense to go home the legal business was over. My father had a quarter of a million dollars in payoff money and a new pickup truck. But the money didn't bring my sister back to life and couldn't buy us any happiness. My father got ill for a time. I think it was his conscience bothering him that he hadn't tried to prosecute the man. He kept the cabinet shop but didn't work at it much. He took to sitting at the window

looking out at the sky.

"But I made a plan. I decided to study hard so I could go to law school, the best law school I could find that would accept me. I wanted to do something to make the system work for the common man, you see; not just the rich and powerful.

"At fifteen I already felt exploited and disenfranchised and I wanted to get even with the world. I went to law school for the worst of all reasons: Revenge. But it didn't take long for me to learn that the system simply wasn't designed to protect the common man; it was designed to destroy him. Oh, once in awhile, maybe, you'll see real justice done when a criminal is sentenced and the victims or survivors are somehow reimbursed for their suffering. But not very damned often, and the attorneys usually end up with the money anyhow.

"It takes money, Richard, if you want the system to work for you. Attorneys, after all, are in business to make money. Lots of it. All they can get their hands on legally or otherwise. But I vowed I wouldn't stoop to that; I was going to become a champion for the people, for all the Anns of the world."

He fell silent for a moment, shaking his head with his eyes closed, turning over some memory, some wound he could not heal. Presently he continued, the words flowing smoothly, his thoughts organized and channeled to a singular bitterness and hatred.

"Question: What does the agency know of the men and women working for them? Answer: Nearly everything. They know every detail of our childhood, including the deaths in our families and how that effected us when we were children. They know if we ever ran away from home and know, or think they know, the reasons why. They know the names of our childhood sweethearts, if we had any. It's likely, too, they know the first time we got laid and whether we enjoyed it or not. They know if we had adolescent homosexual experiences; things no one should be able to find out. They know when we began drinking or smoking or masturbating.

"They go to great lengths to discover these secret things about us so they can evaluate our potential if they decide to recruit us as operatives. Look at the files and you'll see that we are carbon copies of one another. We are all educated, intelligent, highly motivated people, normal with one exception: We all have an axe to grind, a score to settle, and we're willing to kill to win the game.

"Have you ever thought about that, Richard? I never did, never had any reason to until this last year when I came up here. Look at you: I've thought a lot about you during the long hours I sat in that swing and stared at the trees, thought about the emotions that prompt you to action. Do you know what it is? Revenge. That's our common denominator. We are vengeful people who can act out our vengeance without fear of being caught because we have the law on our side. No matter how insidious our crimes, the agency will always protect us just to keep its name from being sullied.

"We are the law. We make the laws and enforce the laws. Judge and jury. We can't lose but we never win because the vengeance is never satisfied." He coughed lightly, clearing his throat and shifting painfully to get comfortable.

"I know more about you than you may know yourself, Richard," he continued. "I know because I've had time to really think about us. Some distorted notion of revenge has brought you here although I'm not certain I know why. No! I don't want to hear the reason just yet. If you want to tell me later, fine. If you came to kill me, whether for yourself or for the agency, I imagine you'll get around to it sooner or later and that's okay, too. Did I mention that I went to law school in Boston?"

"Yes, you did," I nodded. "Listen, Calhoun, this isn't necessary. You don't have to tell me all this stuff."

"You think maybe I've gone batty, Richard?" he bristled. "You think I've let go of my end of the rope? I haven't. I've never felt more confident, more sane in my life. I know I don't have to tell you anything, but I want to. I want someone to know who I am, who I was, before I shuffle off to Buffalo. You just happen to be the person who gets to hear it because you've come around when I'm ready to talk. I was about to tell you something."

"Law school in Boston," I reminded.

"Law school in Boston. Yes. I struggled at first because I was disillusioned. I knew the system was rigged but I still thought I could change all that somehow. I couldn't, of course, but I didn't know it yet. So I struggled. I suffered through it. Oddly enough I did well. I did well because I was driven by that evil beast, revenge. Oh, it is a powerful force is revenge, and I had stuffed my mind with it. I went to sleep with it and woke with it each morning. It was my mistress and my tormentor. It was my tutor and my adversary. It consumed my life and nearly drove me mad. But I did well and, in the end, graduated in the top five of my class.

"I was offered a job with a very respectable law firm even before I graduated, Richard. That's how well I had done. Someone took notice, put in a word for me and I went to work without so much as a break for vacation.

"But the law firm, it turns out, is a training ground, a purgatory if you will, for the goddamned agency! They already knew everything they needed to know about me, as I said; now they were going to sit back and see how well I did in the practice of law.

"Do you know most of our operatives have graduated from law school? Of course I didn't know the law firm was a front for the agency when I went to work there. I only found out later after I was already entrenched but it seemed perfectly natural to me at the time that they would do that; I never questioned it once. Hell, life was so good I didn't even realize I was being exploited by the pros, the people who invented the game.

"I began service with the law firm as an investigative aide compiling data for cases, and soon began handling my own cases. Again, I did well. I could charm a jury into believing anything I wanted and I won a lot of cases. I got a big head and became something of a smart-aleck, for which I was often chastised.

"But I eventually fell into disfavor with the boss, a bitchy, nitpicking, inflexible slut who, for reasons I did not understand at the time, maneuvered me into quitting. Quit or be fired; those were my choices. Big flaming choice. I'd been with the firm a little more than four years.

"Inflexible people scare the hell out of me, man. I married a woman who is inflexible. Everything had to be done according to a set plan with no deviation and, because she couldn't tolerate my seemingly unplanned and unorganized lifestyle, she gave up trying to herd me into line and decided to go to Europe without me."

He sighed, shaking his head and looking at me askance. He mouthed silent words or curses for a time, then sighed again, closing his eyes and leaning back in the chair. Presently he spoke again, his voice quavering slightly as though he was forcing himself not to weep.

"Even sex. Even sex had to be planned like a military operation. The dishes had to be washed and put away first and the carpet had to be vacuumed. Crumbs and dust had to be brushed away and the trash had to be taken out. Baths had to be taken; teeth brushed. The children had to be asleep. The goddamned lights had to be turned out. Not turned down so I could see her breasts, her butt, her lips and eyes and face. Out. Total darkness with the blinds and curtains drawn even if it was midnight.

"Was she afraid I'd notice she enjoyed it or did she fear I'd discover she didn't? Maybe she thought it was a sin to smile or open your eyes during sex. I don't know.

"No noise, not even of pleasure. No moaning or sighing. No speaking. No whispering. That was forbidden. If I cried out from the joy of it she put her hand over my mouth. Put her flaming hand over my mouth as if I were embarrassing her! I couldn't...."

"God," I said.

"Ha?"

"You were disturbing God, waking him up and she was afraid He would look down and see what you were doing," I explained, recounting a detailed story I'd heard from a prostitute who insisted she felt compelled to turn her picture of Jesus to the wall every time she had a customer in her squalid room. She just couldn't bear to humiliate herself in the sight of Jesus.

"As if Jesus couldn't see right through the roof," Calhoun muttered. "By the time she was all ready for me, I felt it wasn't worth the effort. It was like screwing a machine; sterile and mechanical and silent. I wonder if Jesus knows how many times I died in that dark bed?"

He stared at the floor for half a minute lost in a memory he couldn't share, dredging up, then burying, a portion of his past he wasn't willing to tell me. Presently he glanced at me quickly, almost surprised to find I was still there beside him, and reached out to touch my arm to assure himself I was flesh and blood and not an illusion conjured from his tortured mind.

"I married Helen on the bounce, Richard," he sighed. "I was still in love with another woman but I married Helen knowing even as I did so she could never replace what I felt I had lost. Oh, I loved her, still do; I suppose I always will. But it was, is, a different kind of love than I'd had before I met her. Life with Helen was one disaster after another. I can't remember a single day I could look in the mirror and admit I was happy.

"Why do we do things like that to ourselves? We do it because we uncon-

sciously feel we aren't worthy of happiness; we have some uncontrollable desire to punish ourselves for being bad. We create situations where failure and nothing else is the ultimate result of all we do and we don't even know we're doing it. Isn't that stupid? I felt I wasn't man enough to keep the only woman I ever truly loved so I punished myself, beat myself to death, let Helen beat me to death, for fourteen years, trying to atone for my failure."

His voice grew strained and his green eyes filled with tears. I looked away, embarrassed for him, but he cleared his throat and exhaled with a great, trembling moan, trying to compose himself.

"Inflexible people," he said softly. "It's a frightening thought and I am frightened by it. Can I get you anything?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I'm fine. Look, I think I should... ."

He interrupted quickly, fearing perhaps, that changing the subject would make him loose track of his life, loose his place in the book he was telling, stumble so far off the trail he had found that he couldn't get back on it.

Or wouldn't want to.

"Let me tell this, Richard. I may never get the chance again and I want someone to know me, to understand me as I know and understand myself. I know what's waiting for me tomorrow or the next day. If you don't kill me, or can't, others will. And if they don't, boredom and resentment and failure and loneliness will. Any way you look at it, I'm dead."

He arched his eyebrows, silently asking if I'd agree to keep my lip buttoned until he was finished.

I pursed my lip, then, and nodded consent.

"Right. Where was I?"

"You were forced into quitting your job."

"That's right, I quit. And I couldn't get a job anywhere. As successful as I had been, no one would hire me, neither in Boston nor anywhere else. I didn't know it at the time but the agency had put out the word that I was to remain unemployed. They wanted me to suffer a little because they were setting me up for recruitment and they wanted to be certain I'd have no choice but to accept when they got around to offering me a job.

"Still, it seemed I was fated to spend my life waiting for something to happen, for some important event to come along and change my life; events which never occurred, while my life, my dreams, my goals were dashed to dust.

"I mentioned I was in love with another woman before I met and married Helen, didn't I?" he asked, screwing up his face as he tried to remember if he had or not.

"Yes," I said, "you mentioned that." I sat the empty beer bottle on the floor and considered riding back to the camp to see Brandy.

"Her name was Jessica," he said. "Did I tell you about Jessica? If I did, stop me. I hate repeating myself but sometimes I can't remember if I said something or not. That's a common symptom of a man who has spent too much time away from his fellow creatures, you know. I've told myself the story a hundred times, maybe a thousand, while I've been hiding up here just because I've had no one else to talk

to. So stop me if I told you."

"I don't think you told me," I said, realizing that Calhoun was suffering from cabin fever, some form of sensory deprivation that was forcing him to reveal the intimate details of his life. I was the catalyst that uncorked the bottle; the agency the source of his anguish and butt of his bitterness. He seemed unable to stop rambling and I was unwilling to prevent him from doing so.

"No, I haven't heard about her."

He shifted painfully in the chair, favoring his left hip and closed his eyes for a moment as if he had to conjure up the image of the woman in his mind before he could tell the story. He sighed briefly, looked down toward the river and began speaking in the soft drawl that could drown a listener like a warm bath.

"I had just quit my job with the law firm that very afternoon and was sitting in a bar, somewhere down along the Charles, nursing a beer and hating the world for what I unreasonably thought it had done to me. In particular, I was hating that goddammed bitch of a boss who was giving me gray hair and ulcers, and hoping she would drop dead or be struck by a car on her way home that night. I even thought of killing her myself.

"Anyway, I hadn't been there more than ten minutes when I saw this woman come through the door and pause, like she was sizing up the room and the crowd, then watched out of the corner of my eye as she approached and sat next to me.

"She was warm. I could feel the heat radiating from her body even though she was three feet away. She was burning, as if she had a terrible fever. To this day, I can't understand how she could have been radiating all that heat, and, now, I think it was only my imagination.

"I said, 'It's a warm day, isn't it?,' because I couldn't think of anything else to say but I wanted to get a conversation going.

"She smiled at me, rather sadly, nodded, and turned away, quiet and dignified, until the bartender spotted her and asked her what she wanted to drink. She ordered a whiskey and water with no ice.

"Now people who are inflexible irritate me, but a woman who drank whiskey and water with no ice just goddammed near intimidated me right out of the place.

"I was twenty-six then, weighed a hundred and seventy pounds, and was as strong and healthy as a bush gorilla, but I was sitting there drinking a beer, in a glass yet, and this woman comes in and orders a whiskey and water with no ice.

"To say she intimidated me is probably something of an understatement. She frightened me, especially since I had just told my boss, a woman who also intimidated the hell out of me, to go piss up a tree.

"This woman was pretty. Not beautiful, but attractive. Her dark hair was clean and shiny, and she had an oval face that was smooth and tanned. She had applied just enough of a light patina of cosmetics to enhance her natural beauty. Some women go out in public looking like they smeared their makeup on with a coal shovel you know? But not this one; she was elegant looking, and I figured she was some rich dame looking for a good time on the wrong side of town.

"She was wearing a dark blue thigh length dress, had a single strand of pearls at her throat and a petite pearl bracelet on her left wrist. She had no rings, but I could see a faint white line on her left ring finger where one had been, probably only minutes earlier, and I figured it had been a wedding ring.

"The bartender brought her drink, which I paid for, and she thanked me, but she never really looked at me until later when we began talking about the bar and her looking like she was out of place.

"I asked her if she went there often and she said, no, she didn't, and actually didn't know why she was there at all, except it was hot outside and seemed cool inside."

He paused, tugging at his beard and staring at the distant trees.

"I started to say that I'd never seen a woman like her before, but I had; a hundred times. Oh, not the same face, not the same body, but women like her have haunted every pub and coffee house I've ever visited. She'd accept a drink in exchange for conversation and, later, the false security of being with a man for the night, even if the man was a total stranger, which he nearly always would be.

"I'd never been able to figure that out until later in my life when I was alone out in the boonies in Vietnam and Cambodia. Loneliness can do terrible things to the psyche. You'll do things when you're lonely that you wouldn't dream of under different circumstances, when you have a job and are surrounded daily by dozens, even hundreds of attractive people.

"I didn't try to judge her that afternoon. Maybe I was too full of myself, too selfish, you know? I had my own problems and didn't want to burden myself or her with hers. She was there and I was there. I'd already determined that when those kinds of things happened it was because they were supposed to happen. If we had a few drinks and parted without anything happening, fine. If we went to a hotel or back to my room to make love for a few hours, fine. If we became lovers and began having clandestine meetings on the wrong side of town once in a while, well, that would be fine, too.

"She was pretty; I said that. Well, she got prettier as the afternoon wore on. Liquor and loneliness does that. A man can go to bed with the loveliest woman on the face of the earth when he's desperately drunk only to find, when he wakes sober the next morning, that some ugly, wrinkled old bag sneaked in after he passed out.

"But I was sober when I met her, and I can say that she was pretty enough that I actually wanted to fall in love with her that afternoon. I mean, at twenty-six I was very eager to fall in love. It did not strike me then, nor does it strike me now, as being extraordinary that I felt that way about a married woman. It has happened to others just as it happened to me that day, and it is no less compelling for being common.

"One thing that occurred to me then was that we had never exchanged names; had not introduced ourselves, you know? And I knew, somehow, even if I told her my name, she would never tell me hers. That missing ring would have prevented her from doing so.

"If a man tried to question a woman like that she would withdraw from the relationship into a bubble that hovered

about her like a chaperone, and maybe she would disappear for awhile and visit the pubs on the other wrong side of town where no one knew who she was.

"So I decided not to tell my name, and decided not to ask hers. It was as it should be with those kinds of affairs."

He chuckled lightly. "Affairs; I roll that word around in my mind now and find I'm pleased with the sound of it. An affair with her seemed right, as if it was simply the thing to be doing with my life at that moment. I was vulnerable and she was willing to cater to my vulnerability, at least for the time being."

He laughed at that and shook his head as if it had all been a dream that he had conjured out of a sick and lonely mind, and I began to wonder if it wasn't. I even asked him, then was ashamed I had, but he laughed again and admitted he really wasn't certain, although the pain in his heart had convinced him it had really happened.

"No, I really think I fell in love with her that afternoon, Richard. She had a way about her I can't explain, even now, even after having all these years to consider it. She was content to let me be in love with her, but never really reciprocated, you know? Oh, she wasn't cold; far from it. But she confessed the affair was just that and nothing more and insisted we couldn't be seen together walking the streets of Boston arm in arm.

"I talked a lot about my early years in Van Horn, Texas before I settled down in Boston and I could tell she envied me by the way she watched me as I told her, her eyes flashing when I recalled my adventures and nights alone on the road up from Santa Fe when I was a kid. I think she secretly wished she could have done it, that she wished she could have been with me or she could have known me before whatever happened to her in Boston happened, although she never mentioned that to me then or at any time subsequent to our meeting.

"I know she detected a sadness in my tale because I rarely masked it. I was miserably lonely and there was no way I could hide that. It came out in the words as I told her.

"She asked me once if I had left a girlfriend behind and I admitted I had, but was quick to add that I hadn't thought about the girl since I'd left Van Horn.

"But that was a lie. I did think of the girl, many times, while I was away from home, wishing I could go back and find her waiting with tears in her eyes to welcome me into her arms. Her name was Caroline Castillo and she was a dark, beautiful girl with large breasts and wide hips.

"It's odd that's all I can say about her, isn't it? She was more than that, but when I think of her, those are the things that come to mind. Large breasts and wide hips. Large breasts and... Hummm.

"I'm ashamed I can't give you a better description of her, Richard, for she was a very wonderful person and deserves more. Perhaps I'll tell you more about her sometime if you can stay a few days.

"I apologize for getting sidetracked on Caroline, but she was a part of my life and she pops in now and then to haunt me like the others. I was telling you about Jessica, and since I began, I suppose I should complete the story. Where was I?"

"In the bar telling her of the trip to the Grand Canyon when you were a kid," I said.

"Oh, yes. I think she knew I was troubled, the way women can always detect those things in a man, and men can never, or rarely, detect in a woman. They hide their anguish well, don't you think?"

Well, sometimes, I thought.

"But she knew instinctively I was troubled because my loneliness simply would not remain hidden when I told her of my life. She even asked me if something was troubling me and I told her about my former boss being such an intimidating bitch, and that I'd quit my job a few hours earlier.

"I think that's when she decided to make love to me, to let me make love to her. That sounds odd, doesn't it? Have you ever thought about the ritual of civilized sex? I have. Quite fervently for about a year now. I have discovered some strange truths about us as humans. Do you realize that, except in cases of forced sex; that is, rape, it is always the woman who makes the decision to have sex? If a woman wants to have a sexual encounter and there is a man available, she will have sex. But if a man wants to, no matter how many women are available, he doesn't get to until the woman is ready. Does that makes sense? I've tried to think of a situation where it didn't apply and have found none.

"It seems strange that it happens that way. But some women have this mother complex, this desire to comfort and succor troubled men, I think. Especially someone like Jessica who, I found out later, had a child and a husband whom she dearly loved and simply refused to give up for me.

"I don't blame her for that, although I surely did at the time. I knew, deep in my heart, she was married right from the beginning, but I refused to believe it and felt I'd been cheated of a lifetime of happiness when she left me.

"Anyway, I offered to buy her another drink, hoping, I think, that the liquor would quicken her desire to let me take her to bed. That, of course, was before I realized she'd already decided to do so.

"She declined, saying she was a light drinker and too much liquor made her sleepy. At the time I thought that was the only reason humans had invented the damned stuff. A few beers or blended whiskies and cola put me right to sleep, and I drank to forget, to sleep without being troubled by ugly dreams.

"I usually drank until I passed out back then. But somehow it seemed better than laying awake staring at the ceiling in a dark, dirty room wondering what the hell I'd done wrong to deserve the suffering I had to endure.

"When she said that about too much liquor making her sleepy, I realized, for the first time, she might be entertaining thoughts of going to my room to spend the night so I shoved my beer away. I'd only had two or three and they hadn't made me sleepy. I think I was too interested in what was going to happen to be sleepy, anyway, because she sat there looking at me the way I've seen people look at horses at the race track, wondering if it was strong, if it could run faster than all the others, if it could surge ahead in the stretch and win the big one, you know?

"And seeing her watch me like that

turned me on! Can you imagine? There I was, twenty-six years old, had been in bed with more women than I can count or recall, and I was very eager to get into bed with her.

"But, I swear, it wasn't just lust, although there was certainly that. She was the first woman who ever made me feel wanted. Can you understand that? Not wanted sexually, but desired as a lover, wanted for myself.

"I was deluding myself, of course, although I didn't know it at the time. It was only much later, after she finally left, that I realized the truth of the matter. It was she who felt wanted and loved much more than me, and I suppose she never had much love from her husband, although I'm only guessing because I only saw him from a distance, once, and never got to meet him.

"God, but I wanted to! Is that masochistic? I really wanted to stroll up to the fellow and talk to him on the street, to find out what kind of a person he was. Without ever letting him know I was screwing his wife, of course.

"Thinking about it now, it seems almost evil, but I did want to meet him and I can't explain why. Some perversity in my nature, I suppose.

"Jessica seemed willing to go with me, then, and I was ready to lead the way. But for some reason I couldn't get off the bar stool, take her hand and walk out with her. I think I was genuinely afraid that I had misinterpreted her cues and didn't want to be thought of as a fool. Rejection, no matter how slight, would have reduced me to tears just then.

"But I was so entranced by her, so eager to touch her and hold her that I simply blurted it out after I got control of the fear that she would reject me. If she said no and slapped my face, I decided, I would really be no worse off than before she came into the bar, except that I would have her handprint on my cheek.

"But she replied very softly that if I wanted her she would go, but she couldn't spend the entire night, and I had to promise not to hurt her.

"I was astounded. I know I must have gaped at her with my mouth open because she apologized immediately. I told her if she was afraid she didn't have to go and I'd understand.

"God, but I was a chivalrous bastard that afternoon! It wasn't what I wanted to say at all. I wanted to say hell yes I want you, I want to pull off your dress and bury my face between your breasts until I die of suffocation! But I didn't; I said if you're afraid, I'll understand.

"And the only reason I can offer now for having said that was because I already felt I was in love with her and didn't want to offend her. I didn't want her to believe I was some crude bastard who didn't care about her feelings.

"Love, I think, is the most beautiful, and at the same time, the most cruel thing that can happen to a human being. Especially to a young man who was as vulnerable as I was then. I mean, my terror was clinging to the very outside of my skin and I wanted desperately for her to peel it off and take it with her. I wanted to compact it all into one tightly packed sphere and shove it up inside her as far as I could so I could never find it again.

"That's awful, isn't it? We should be strong enough to deal with our misery alone without making someone else a

part of it, without burdening innocent people with our grief. I just couldn't do it, that's all. I needed someone who would take it away for me. And she did. Willingly, I believe.

"I never agonized verbally while we were making love, but I always felt, right from the first night, that she was trying to screw the bitterness and anger out of me.

"How can a woman do that? How can anyone, for that matter? People do, but I haven't been able to understand how they can bear to accept someone else's anguish, to wash it away in a sexual act.

"But Jessica did, and I misinterpreted my feelings of gratitude as genuine love for her.

"Well, she looked at me for a long time after I told her she didn't have to go. It seemed a long time. Centuries. And all the time I was cursing myself for having said it and hoping she hadn't heard me.

"Presently she said, 'No, it's okay. I'll go with you'. God, my heart soared. I've never been so elated in my life. Neither before nor since.

"We walked the short distance to my room, after she said she didn't want to go to a hotel because she feared it would make the moment seem cheap. Those were her words. Cheap. As if going to my room would make it not cheap. Looking back, I can't recall a single time the thought entered my mind, but, then, I was agog and just too infatuated with her to believe it was wrong.

"To this day, I still don't think of it as wrong. I'm not even certain we can put things like that into categories of right or wrong. It simply happened and I accepted it as a part of my life at the time, as did she, I think.

"But there was a difference, as I was to discover later. I was in love and growing more in love with her as the days passed, and she never was in love with me. Not even for a moment. She made love to me, but she never loved me.

"Does that make sense? Sometimes I think I understand how she felt and why she did what she did, and at other times I find myself completely baffled by her ability to act out the intensity of our love making without committing herself to being in love.

"It is one aspect of women I have never been able to fathom, that capacity to make love without loving. Men, I suspect, are unable, for the most part, to do that. If they love, they love, whether they are able to express it as succinctly as they would desire or not, but I believe most *civilized* men—those I have met, at least—must believe in their own minds they are in love with a woman before they can make love to her.

"While we walked to my room, which was a short distance away, she slipped her arm through mine and leaned against me gracefully. She was smiling, as if we were old friends or long time lovers, and seemed very much at ease.

"I knew she was older than I, perhaps by six or eight years, but it didn't seem to matter to her. She was well educated, too, and knew many of the prominent people of Boston, although she never mentioned anyone by name during our conversations. I suspect she was a native of the city because she knew so much about it, and I suspected, too, that she might have been a socialite out slumming for an evening, a lonely, bored housewife

looking for a clandestine sexual encounter with a stranger, someone she knew she'd never see again.

"But all I could think about, or all I remember thinking about, was what it would be like to come home to her every night, to be married to her and live with her in a beautiful house, and to be her constant companion.

"I used to think it sad that I fell so deeply in love with her—and it was an impossible situation, you know—and that I had to lose her without an explanation. I once told her, stupidly, that she didn't have to love me if I could only love her and spend all my years with her.

"But it isn't sad at all. On the contrary, it was a painfully beautiful thing to have happened to me at that time in my life. The memories, even now, are poignant to the verge of tears, but I do not regret having loved her, and I cannot regret having lost her. She was not mine to lose, after all, but at the time only she understood that. She changed my life for all time in ways I cannot fully explain. I came away with a fuller understanding of life—certainly of love—and I found, years later, she had given me something no other person before or since could have done.

"She allowed me to look inside her life, however briefly, to find the meaning of my own. For that alone, I will always be grateful, and I will always love her for what I see now was a rather generous sacrifice on her part."

Calhoun lapsed into silence, gazing toward the forest, breathing softly with his arms folded across his chest. Presently his eyes flashed toward me and he smiled with one side of his mouth.

"Do I talk too much? Yes, I suppose I do, but I haven't had anyone up here for a long time—not anyone I know as well as I know you—and I have to admit I've been lonely."

He waited for a response and when none came, he shifted upright, pushing his long legs out in front of him, grimacing and massaging his left hip.

"How was the beer? Can I get you anything else?"

"Oh, Christ, no! It was great. Thanks. I thought for a while last night I was going back to eating rats and snakes."

"Squirrels; there aren't any rats up here."

"Yeah? What's a squirrel but a rat with a bushy tail?"

"Hmmm," he answered, looking toward the river again. I asked him if he was expecting company.

"The cat," he answered simply.

"Cat?" I was conjuring up images of a mountain lion that would arrive any second to begin sizing us up for lunch.

"A scrawny little black pussy cat wandered in here one day last winter," he explained. "Nearly starving to death she was. I fattened her up and let her sleep in the shed. She paid her way by keeping the squirrels out of my pantry and sitting on my lap listening to all my stories until spring came and the snow melted. Then she wanted out to investigate the mountain. About a week ago she wandered off and I haven't seen her since.

"She learned to knock on the door when she wanted in or out and she taught me when to open it. She trained me so well I can't break the habit of waiting for her to come knocking. Do you like cats?"

I nodded, admitting that I'd had a few

cat friends in my day.

"Yeah," he said, "me, too. You know what I like about them? They can't be had, can't be bought; you can't own a cat. It owns you. It decides when it's going to get you and it decides when it's going to leave. If a cat doesn't like what you're saying or doing, it'll just flip its tail at you, lays down and goes to sleep. Or it'll turn around and just walk away, something we humans should learn to do. That's a cat's way of saying, 'To hell with you, Jack.' I like that. I hope she comes back; I hate to think something happened to her." He waved his hand in front of his face to erase the thought and stood.

"Shall we go in?" he asked.

I nodded, and followed him in. I wondered about Calhoun. He could kill a person—man woman or child, it didn't matter to him—by sticking them with a poisoned needle, or blow them and their houses into eighty-seven million pieces, or walk up and fire a bullet through their heads and never even think about them again, never regret having done it. But this same man, who at one glance might appear to be an evil, cold blooded murderer—which he certainly was—this same man could let a starving cat into his house and let it sit on his lap telling it stories through a long, lonely winter, and have the compassion to worry that something might happen to her out there all alone on the mountain.

A puzzling man, that Calhoun. I got to feeling guilty that he was more worried about his cat than I was about Brandy, and it didn't sit well inside my head. But why so much concern for a cat and so little for human beings? I asked him.

"The cat never hurt anybody," he answered, patting me on the shoulder like I was a little kid about to cry when I realized Bambi's mother got killed.

"And the people?"

He held up a thumb and his face grew stern and ugly.

"Number one: drug dealers. They kill our kids before they're old enough to know what life is about. Number two: arms dealers. They kill our sons and daughters when they should be having the most perfect times of their lives. Number three: crooked politicians who are flushing our country down the toilet. Number four: military spies—they should have been number one—who are killing their comrades for money. Number five: people who exploit the poor and uneducated for profit. Shall I continue? No? Yes? Number six: terrorists, foreign and domestic, who kill innocent men, women and children, infants, in the name of religion. You want to know what I say to them before I kill them? I say, 'How can God save you when you killed 250 Marines in that barracks that night in Lebanon? Tell your God to come down here and save your ass now.'

"Number seven: Money grubbers who sell pornography and drugs to our children on one corner of the block and organize coalitions to stamp out pornography and drugs on the other corner of the same block so they can get money both ways.

"More? I could go on all afternoon. I could tell you things that would make you vomit and I know you've seen your share of shit and then some. If I blow some captain or admiral to hell and gone because he is corrupting the system by which this country bids for and purchases equip-

ment from contractors, then I don't see that his death is a loss to anyone. If I kill a contractor for the same reason, then all I can say is shame on them.

"But I don't kill innocent people. I would have killed Alan Haniford had I known he was going to try to kill me, but I wouldn't kill his sister even if she came up here with a gun and shoved it in my face."

He sat down abruptly, holding his head in his hands and rocking back and forth, moaning softly with his mouth open.

"God," he said, "sometimes I think I've gone mad."

I walked over to him, put a hand on his shoulder. "Can I do something, Calhoun?" I asked, genuinely afraid he was going to come unwound. He shrugged my hand away and stood, pacing awkwardly to the door and back again.

"No."

"You're okay?"

"I'm fine; leave me alone for a while. Go outside. I want to think."

"Maybe I should leave," I said as I grabbed my coat and headed for the porch.

"No! Don't go yet." He grabbed my arm and spun me around, held me at arms length. "Not just yet. I want to talk a while longer. And I want you to wait until the cat comes back so you can take her with you. Will you do that? Will you take the cat?"

I paused, thinking about dragging the cat back down the mountain and taking care of it until one of us died or Brandy divorced me. I mumbled something about trying.

"You don't have to keep her, Richard. Just take her back to civilization. Find her a good home with someone who will care for her. She won't live through a winter up here. She'll freeze. She'll starve. Can you do that?"

I told him I would wait for another day, but if the cat didn't come back by then, I'd have to leave. I promised so I could get out of the house, so I wouldn't have to watch him fall apart, agonizing over a stray animal that was probably twenty miles away or already dead, not wanting to be near him if he suddenly went berserk and started shooting up the place and me along with it.

I sat on the porch for twenty minutes listening to him bang around inside. Later he went out the back door and I could hear his footsteps heading up toward the outhouse. When he came back, limping around the side of the house, he looked calm, his face relaxed, his eyes clear. He carried the walking stick, used it to mount the steps and make his way to his chair.

"I'm sorry about that, Richard," he said softly. "I think it's the medicine I've been taking for this pain in my leg. That gunshot wound never did heal properly. The bone in my hip was shattered, you know, and the cold, damp weather gets me down. The pain is terrible sometimes and I wait too long to take the pills because they make me sick."

He sat heavily, groaning as he did so, and worked his way down to a comfortable position with his eyes closed while his medicine went to work.

I decided the medicine—whatever it was—must be screwing up his thinking, causing him to ramble and rant, making him irritable and contentious, throwing

him into fits of joy one moment and into pits of depression the next.

He was right. If the people from the agency didn't kill him, living alone would. I knew in my heart he would refuse to go, but I began thinking of a way to get him down off the mountain.

SIX

He slept for half an hour, completely relaxed, almost in a coma, breathing softly and regularly with his hands turned palms up in his lap. The walking stick slipped away and got caught on the arm of the chair with the tip jammed under his left foot. I watched him carefully to make certain he wasn't dead, then got up and made my way to the outhouse. When I came back he was still in the same position, purring quietly. I made a move to get the stick out from under his foot, thought better of it, and sat down again, listening to the quiet, watching the cedars bowing in the wind, hearing the Selway six hundred feet below us shushing away to the falls, to Brandy.

I had to make some kind of decision. I wanted to leave as soon as possible and get back to Brandy. If what Calhoun said was true, the four men who had come up the river with me the day before could be from the agency.

Brandy could be in danger and I was almost desperate to return and get us both out of harm's way, even though I knew we couldn't travel far enough to ever escape them if they had it in mind to kill us.

But why couldn't I do that? Why was I sitting there waiting for Calhoun to wake up when I knew he would think my idea to get him off the mountain foolish? If I saddled the horse and left immediately, I might make it to the rest camp by nightfall, be back at Boyd's Creek by noon the following day. It seemed simple but I couldn't get up. I just sat there and waited for Calhoun to take his nap.

He awoke suddenly, crying out as he reached for the walking stick, shaking some pitiful dream from his head as he became aware of the waking world, the real world, the cabin and the mountains that were both refuge and prison. When his vision cleared and he saw me, he smiled, stretching as he struggled upright.

"I believe that's the best I've slept since I came up here. I'm glad you stayed. How long was I out?"

"Half an hour," I said, formulating a way to ask him what he thought about going back to Boyd's Creek with me. "And you did sleep well until right there at the end."

"I was having a dream; the medicine does that. Have you ever dreamed in color? I do. Bright, vivid colors, patterns and shapes. People are like Picasso's, though. All misshapen and out of whack sometimes. I can't figure out who they are. I hear voices but they don't say real words, only humming and mumbling.

"Sometimes I think I hear the cat crying but when I look for her she isn't where I think she should be. Am I going crazy?"

I shook my head. "Probably; I don't know. Look, Dallas, what do think about going back with me? You should probably see a doctor and get yourself into a hospital."

He studied me for long moments then

shook his head.

"You think I should leave, have myself committed?"

"Not committed, for Christ's sake; I didn't say that. But I think you should consult a doctor about the medicine. Maybe it isn't right for you, maybe it...."

"Well, I'm not going, Richard, so forget it," he interrupted. "I'm not putting myself into a hospital where people from the agency can walk in and tie a sack over my face. No." He shook his head vigorously. "Forget it. If I have to die— and maybe it's time for that—I want to do it standing up, facing my killer with a gun in my hand, not strapped to a bed in some funny farm."

I looked away, unable to meet his glaring eyes, and cocked my head in agreement. His thoughts about that had a lot of merit. Hell, that's the way I'd want to do it, so who was I to tell him he had to do it some other way?

"Okay," I said. "You know, Dallas, if you didn't send the letter that means someone else knows you're up here."

"Didn't it seem odd to you that some stranger would hand you a letter and walk sway without an explanation?" he asked.

"No. I thought it was a card. And, anyway, Allison told me you would probably contact me. When I read the letter, I thought you had made contact."

"And it only contained instructions how to find me, where I was?"

"Yes, but only in a very general way. I don't like this, Dallas. I should go back to see if Brandy is okay, don't you think?"

"Do what you feel you have to do, Richard. I didn't invite you up here and I have no right to demand that you stay. If it was me and my wife was down there, I'd go back. I wouldn't have left in the first place."

He screwed up his face and looked at me then, his mouth forming silent words, his eyes blinking nervously.

"But, then, that isn't true at all, is it? I would leave. I did leave. Many times. Do what you have to do."

I sat welded to the chair, completely unable to make my legs lift me and walk me to the corral. My brain seemed to have become disconnected from the rest of my body. "I'll stay until tomorrow," I said, wishing, instead, I had told him I was leaving.

He nodded, turning sideways in the chair to look up the hill behind the cabin. I expected him to ask if I'd seen the cat while he was sleeping but he didn't. After a while, he turned back and squirmed down to get comfortable.

"It's a pity things didn't turn out the way I'd planned, Richard," he said suddenly. "I thought by leaving the agency I'd be able to live some kind of normal life. This was pleasant for a while, almost extramundane; a paradise away from the insanity of a cruel society. But I've lost Helen and the kids, probably forever."

"Yes," I said, "I know."

He studied me for a while, his face a mask of indifference. "Well, if you've found me, the others won't be far behind. I suppose I should be getting ready for them."

I felt like we were beginning the morning conversation all over again and I cringed, wondering if I should tell him we had already discussed it. Instead, I

looked away toward the forest, longing for the trail, imagining myself riding back across the meadow, down the mountain, back to sanity.

"I came alone, Dallas. I haven't kept in contact with the agency and they don't know I'm here." I looked back at him and found him still staring at me with moody green eyes. Vacant, clear green eyes. I shivered.

"You may not have been in contact with the agency, Richard," he said, "but you can bet they've kept track of you. They know you're here, and if they know you're here, they know I'm here as well."

"I don't see how they could know. As far as I can figure out, they think you're dead. Spenser Halsey said it with his own mouth and Dansforth verified it."

"Halsey," he said bitterly. "May he drop dead before he gets to retire. He's probably the one who sent the letter. If so, his assassins aren't far behind." He nodded toward the river.

"Halsey isn't in charge anymore," I said, realizing that Calhoun didn't know Halsey had slipped away, out of the country, after Operation Capricorn in Washington State, after Calhoun himself vanished. So he didn't know, or, at least, he pretended not to know Halsey was no longer Director at DICE.

"Really?" he asked, arching his eyebrows. "Who's in charge now?"

"Christian Houser."

"I know him. He's a better man than Halsey, although he'll let some of his Department Heads run all over him. How about Dansforth? He still there?"

"Chief of Section C last I heard."

"Hmmm. I'd have thought he'd be Deputy Director by now."

"Jason Brown," I said, summing up the Chain of Command.

"Okay. That was a good move. Jason was the best field op I ever met, bar none. He deserves the position. I hope he makes Director some day."

"May we long enough to see it."

"We probably won't," he said.

I fell into a morose silence, hoping we could return to the subject of the letter and the stolen money. I was hoping for answers to my questions, not discussions of the rearrangement of the agency. I waited, thinking he'd get back to the problem but he didn't. He just sat there looking at me with sad eyes, saying nothing, offering no explanations as if the subject had slipped his mind entirely. When I thought of his recent behavior, I decided it had.

Presently he stood and walked to the porch railing, leaning against it heavily with his hands behind his back.

"I could have gone to South America or Africa," he said. "I almost went to the Seychelles. Maybe I should have."

"Why didn't you, then?"

"I'm not finished with my project. I suspect the people I'm after sent you up to find me although I can't imagine why. Perhaps they thought I'd kill you or that you would kill me. They must know I'm still alive and on the case, but why they have involved you is beyond me."

"Maybe they think they will somehow discover what Spenser Halsey locked inside my head during that briefing in Washington, D.C."

"Maybe. Have you remembered anything?"

I admitted I hadn't then asked him again if he had heard from Allison Haniford. He just shook his head.

"She knows a lot about you, Dallas," I said.

"Why not? She was a computer operator at the Farm."

"Was?"

"Well, yes. Someone told me she quit her job, I think."

Calhoun was lying. If he had been hiding from the agency and if no one was supposed to know where he was, he could not possibly have heard that information from anyone.

Except Allison Haniford.

"She seems to have more than professional interest in you, Dallas," I said. "As someone looking at your life from the outside, I'd be comfortable making a bet that she is in love with you."

"Really?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Did you ever give any thought to some kind of relation... ."

He gave me wry smile and patted his leg. "My legs have refused to get up these days, Richard. No, we are retired. If she has an interest in me, I assure you it is all one way. But I see now that Allison has told you more than she should have about me."

"Did you know her brother?" I asked.

"Of course I knew him, Richard," he replied softly. "We served together at the Saigon station in Vietnam before he disappeared, before Halsey sent him undercover. Why does that bother you?"

I stuffed my hands into my pockets, feeling for the Colt in case I had to use it in the next few seconds. Calhoun stiffened slightly but his expression of indifference never changed.

"I just thought you had brought Haniford to the cabin to kill me, that's all. Later I began to believe you lured him there so I could kill him because he had learned what you were up to and had become a liability. And Allison seemed to know a little too much about you, too, like you two had spent some time discussing what you were going to do with the money, you know? She didn't just figure that out while we were waiting to be airlifted out of the damned hills up there, Dallas. When I got to thinking about it I figured you wanted Haniford killed in a way that wouldn't incriminate you."

"And you think I manipulated you into committing murder for me so I could leave the agency clean."

"Maybe," said I.

"And, of course, I'd have to kill you and Brandy, too, to complete the circle?"

"Yes."

He looked away from me, studying the light and shadow under the cedars at the edge of the clearing, cleared his throat and shifted awkwardly in the chair.

"No good, Richard," he said. "I'd have to kill Halsey and Dansforth, too. Maybe Houser and Jason Brown. The list would be endless. At any rate, I'll tell you honestly I didn't lure Haniford to the cabin so you could kill him and I most certainly do not intend to kill you and Brandy."

"But you see why I thought you might."

He nodded, pursing his lips and tapping the walking stick against the side of his boot heel, blinked and focused on a point between my eyes. Presently he

turned away, speaking softly, addressing the sky and referring to me as a third person.

"Why would I do that? To prevent someone from exposing me? Answer: No; I was already exposed.

"Evidence indicated I had stolen one hundred million dollars to finance what? My retirement to this shithole? No. To buy an island and live in luxury? No.

"Someone gave Constable a letter so he could drive straight to my door. Why, I wonder?

"Could Allison Haniford have sent the letter? No, because she didn't know where I was going to be.

"Did she meet with her brother sometime prior to the assault on Fourney's camp? Did he know I had one hundred million dollars in my pocket? No and no.

"Who but Alan and I knew what I was going to do prior to his death? Halsey may have suspected, certainly no others. Fourney sent Alan to kill me and Halsey found out about it. Did he also discover I was planning a permanent leave of absence? Yes, that has merit.

"Does anyone else know I'm still alive?"

He turned to me with his eyebrows up. I shrugged, told him I hadn't mentioned it to anyone, hadn't even known what he was doing until Allison explained it that afternoon in Washington State.

He rose and walked to the steps, peering up into the cedars, squinting his eyes against the glare of the bright blue sky.

"Did she mention if she had talked to her brother before the operation in Washington?" he asked.

"No. But she must have sometime because she knew how the agency contacted you when they needed you to fix things for them in some foreign office. She knew everything; the right words in the proper sequence, the classified section, everything. She even knew how you answered and when; she knew where you would appear. Haniford could have told her. But how could he have got the information about you?"

The walking stick thumped against the floor twice as Calhoun swayed back and forth. He seemed worried as he analyzed the information.

"You know, Richard," he said at length, "there is always more than one answer to any question; always more than one solution to any problem. Sometimes there are dozens. All but one are wrong. This question, this problem, may remain unsolved until we can question Allison Haniford.

"If I had to venture a guess, however, I'd say Alan Haniford spent a lot of time probing into my extracurricular activities. I suspect he found out the agency used me for those various covert operations.

"We now know he was the person who had followed me for six months. I went to South America once. To Africa twice and to England once during that period. If he was following me, thinking I was the unknown assassin, as he suspected, comparing his movements to Dallas Calhoun's movements during that time, it would have been fairly easy for him to conclude I was.

"Alan was a good operative. Not exceptional, but good. He got away with more than most of us could because he

really didn't exist. No one could check his records because there were none. Oh, I think I remember seeing one brief page in his dossier but, other than that, he was a nonentity.

"That was Spenser Halsey's doing. I often wished I had Haniford's anonymity so I could hide, disappear, when I wanted to. The idea appealed to me so much I actually invented an alter ego, thinking I could use it to make Calhoun vanish." He turned toward me and smiled sadly.

"But it didn't work," I said. "Tell me why you think the agency sent the letter. What reason would they have for doing that?"

He said the agency may have discovered that he had staged his death at the hospital so he could leave the agency without anyone asking questions. But he added it was only a guess. When I asked how anyone could know he was still alive and why the agency would come looking for him, or send me the letter so I could come looking for him, he exhaled and made his way back to his chair, falling in it awkwardly.

"You know what an Irish pennant is, Richard?" Calhoun had asked me. "In maritime jargon, it's a ravelling, the bitter end of a ship's line left out where some fool can trip over it; a loose end. That's what we are. Loose ends. The agency doesn't like loose ends; they want to cut them off and tie them up as quickly and as neatly as they can so they don't have to worry about tripping over them.

"We know too much about them and we are roaming around out here in the real world. They're scared to death we're going to tell everyone we meet how rotten they are. That we wouldn't isn't important to them; they only surmise that eventually we will.

"Imagine the chills they must get at night when they think one of their agents might walk into a newspaper office with a wild story about the agency maneuvering some head of state into starting a war with America so we would have justification to send our troops in to take over the country.

"Imagine their chagrin if they were to be confronted by headlines implicating them in the smuggling of drugs and arms, the deaths of women and children, an explosion aboard an airplane that kills three hundred people just to destroy a briefcase containing some papers they didn't want anyone to read."

"Or hire the Chinese to print billions of dollars worth of counterfeit money for them."

"Exactly," he said. "The reason you hear so little about these things, even when they happen daily, is because those involved are killed when they begin to make noises, or they are threatened with death so they will toe the line."

He shook his head sagely. "No, Richard, the agency is real uncomfortable with loose ends; they try to tie them up right away."

I slumped in my chair with my arms between my knees, staring at the floor. Every question had more than one answer. Calhoun's answer was a splendid one and I could think of no comment to refute it, no question I could ask to clarify it. Everything he said sounded perfectly logical to me.

If the agency learned that Calhoun—one of their own special agents—was an

assassin who had been hired to kill truculent hirelings and VIPs, the agency might come looking for him, hoping to tie up a few loose ends, thinking that Calhoun might reveal that the agency had hired him to kill a half-dozen prominent people all over the world.

Since I knew what they knew, and knew what Calhoun knew, I figured I was pretty high on their list of priorities as well. At the same time, I could be right at the top of Calhoun's list of loose ends. I chewed my lip, decided that Calhoun probably had no intention of letting me just get up and walk away to tell everyone where he was, cat or no cat.

And Calhoun hadn't explained how Allison knew he was still alive nor had he satisfactorily explained why he knew she had quit her job. The only thing I could think of was that they were staying in contact for some reason.

I looked up, found him standing nearby with the walking stick over his shoulder, smiling down at me. I was so startled to find him there that I instinctively gripped the .45.

"You figure something out?" he asked.

"Maybe. "

"Want to share it?"

I shook my head.

"Hey, relax, Richard," Calhoun said as he wandered back to his chair, sat, and folded his hands in his lap.

"If I'd wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead. But I have no desire to kill you; there is no reason for it. I'll try to kill the others if they get this far, but not you. And I know you really don't want to kill me. I figured that out the first five seconds."

"What makes you think not?" I asked, tugging at the pistol to make certain it would slide out of the pocket easily. Just in case.

"Because if you had wanted to kill me you would have brought your long barreled 30.06 rifle, not a hand gun. You would have sat out there in the trees and waited until I wandered outside to get some wood for the stove. Something like that. You would have killed me from out there somewhere." He waved a hand toward the trees.

"Then you would have gone back to your camp, kissed Brandy, and sat down to one of her fine meals. You wouldn't even tell her what you'd done, and wouldn't think of me again. But that isn't your style. It's mine, but it isn't your's. The others will do it that way and may be out there right now, waiting to see if you're going to do it."

I glanced away to the forest, imagining someone waiting there with a pair of binoculars, watching to see what I was going to do.

"There are no others; I've already told you that," I grumbled.

"Says you; I know better. Has anyone visited your camp since you arrived"

"No one who would interest you."

"But someone."

"Four environmentalists from an institute back east," I said.

"Ah, just four environmentalists, then. Dipping water from the river and having a grand old time, I suppose." He eased back in the chair and put his feet on the railing, his eyes sweeping the brush at the base of the trees, looking for any dark

shapes that shouldn't be there.

"Do they know you came here?" he asked presently.

"We rode up together for a ways," I said. "Then they got caught at the river when it began raining and I came on alone."

He looked at me as though he were trying to gauge whether or not I was lying, scratched the side of his chin and closed his eyes.

"Did you have a guide?" he asked.

"Yes, a fellow named Moon."

"And did the guide caution them against going down to the river when he knew it was going to rain?"

"Yes, but... ."

"But they went anyhow, completely disregarding the guide's warning."

"Yes."

"Why did they do that, do you reckon?"

"The leader is an obstinate ass. He wanted to take some samples then make camp near the river. I suppose he was just stupid and didn't know the danger. Why?"

"That didn't seem odd to you?"

"In what way?"

"You think a man who's been around rivers for more than a week or two wouldn't know he couldn't camp on the river bank during a rain storm? And the guide; if he was familiar with the area he should have known about the little lean-to you stayed in. He certainly would have known about the rest camp across the meadow. Just seems odd to me is all."

"I didn't think about it at the time," I said. "All I wanted was protection from the rain. I figured I was lucky to find it."

He fell silent, almost asleep, his head nodding drowsily. Presently he spoke again.

"Why didn't you go down with them?" he asked from under his hat.

"I was more interested in getting up here to see what you wanted."

"You didn't see them again?"

"No."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"Three fellows on horseback headed down river about five miles below here. They weathered the storm at the rest camp on the other side of the savannah."

Calhoun nodded and clicked his tongue. "That'd be Max Hanks and the two hunters from Seattle. They stopped here the day before to rest their horses. You ever see your guide before?"

"No. He looked like a guide and acted like a guide; I didn't give it any thought one way or the other."

I got out of my chair and leaned back against the railing while I stared at the side of Calhoun's head. He sat motionless for nearly a minute, grinding his teeth and casting furtive glances toward the trees from under the brim of his hat. When he turned toward me later his eyes were dark and somber.

"Let's go inside, Richard," he said. "It's getting a little chilly and my leg is beginning to ache again. I think your environmentalist friends are from the agency and we have to decide what we're going to about them."

He closed the door behind us, pulled the shades over all the windows, then walked to the table and motioned for me to sit while he lighted some candles.

When he had them burning, he tossed a couple of logs into the fireplace, hung his jacket on the peg and came back to sit opposite me at the table. He leaned on it heavily and sighed.

"We've got to consider that those four men are from the agency and are here to see that you kill me. If you don't, they'll do it themselves. Then they'll kill you so you can't tell anyone they've been up here."

"And Brandy."

"Yes, Brandy. Of course."

I thought about the four men and the guide making their way along the river. If they were who Calhoun thought they were, why did they make such a dangerous effort to look foolish when it would have been easier to simply ride on to the cabin? Why not just kill us both back there at Boyd's Creek? I asked Calhoun what he thought about it.

"Well, maybe they wanted to toss you in the river or something. Maybe they were hoping you could lead them to the cabin. You say the guide protested?"

I nodded, recalling how Albert had insisted on camping at the rock bar for the night. Calhoun weighed the information for a time, then shrugged.

"Maybe they figured it would look too obvious if they obeyed the guide; maybe they figured they could lose him later and come on alone."

"Or maybe they are who they say they are and don't give two hoots in a handbasket about you," I replied, thinking they would have a real tough time throwing Moon off their trail.

He was quiet for a while, staring at the wood grain pattern on the table top, then looked at me and shook his head. "I don't know, Richard," he said softly. "Tell me about these guys; what did they look like, how did they act?"

I gave him descriptions.

Calhoun stiffened when I mentioned Cheney's name, his face frozen into a disbelieving stare, but he had shaken it off by the time I finished the description and was staring calmly at his hands.

"Any beards or mustaches?" he asked presently.

"No."

"Any of them married?"

"Tom said he was. Carl talked about an ex."

"Any jewelry?"

"Wristwatches," I answered.

"No rings?"

"I didn't see any."

Calhoun went through a short list of characteristics that might identify them as agents. None of them smoked, they all had well-groomed hair. Tom had manicured nails. All had soft hands without callouses.

Brandy had not mentioned seeing weapons while she snooped around their rig, although there were some cartons large enough to hold weapons had they been broken down.

"Do they have an act?" Calhoun asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do they have an act; do they laugh and joke a lot, push each other around? Will one support the comments of another? Do they ramble off on tangents, one talking about one thing and one talking about another at the same

time? Do they argue, fight a lot? Are they quiet or loud? That kind of stuff."

I explained that I thought they were an obnoxious, abusive, sarcastic bunch of bumbling fools.

Calhoun listened, nodding and screwing up his face as I told it. He considered it quietly for a while, patting his hand softly on the table. Finally he gave me wry smile. "Would you say they purposely distract you to get you thinking in five different directions at the same time?"

I nodded, excluded Moon, and asked him what he thought it meant.

"Sounds like perfect cover to me. I could be wrong, but I don't think so. It's difficult to imagine four awkward fools could be field ops, isn't it? That's why I'm inclined to believe they are. If they were who they said they were, one of them should have a little sense, don't you think?"

I agreed and we discussed it for a while. In the end however, neither of us could offer a solution since the four hadn't arrived up to burn us out. I asked Calhoun what he was going to do.

"I'm going to think about it a some more," he said. "The question is: What are you going to do?"

I'd already made my decision to saddle the mare and get back to Brandy, leaving Calhoun to live in peace as long as he could. He had his nightmares, his awful memories and, despite the calmness he displayed on the surface, the loneliness and pain that drove him to fits of madness. He'd have to live with them; it wasn't up to me to judge him and I didn't want to inherit a moment of his insanity.

I told him I'd leave the next morning and go back to San Diego, assured him I'd never reveal where he was. His face remained impassive, his hands calmly patting the table, his breathing soft and regular. At length he smiled gently, his eyes crinkling shut at the corners.

"Well, I'm not sure I can let you do that, Richard," he said. "Bringing trouble and bailing out before the shooting begins ain't playing by Queen's rules. I think you ought to stick around, for the night anyway, just to see what's what."

SEVEN

"I will not die alone, and I will not die without a fight," Calhoun said. "I have plans for my life, Richard, and those plans do not include being trapped and killed by agents from DICE." He moaned slightly and his hand began to tremble.

"Until I can determine what part you have played in this, you will not leave. If I find that you've told me the truth, if the others don't come up, I'll let you go. Take your pistol out of your pocket and place it on the table pointing toward you, please."

"Not likely," said I as I made a move for it.

The walking stick made a click noise, and from the end of it I could see a thin, foil-like blade. It was barely an inch from my heart.

"This will kill you, Richard. Sadly, it will not be quick and painless. The pistol."

I eased the .45 out, finger and thumb like I knew he'd want it, and slid it to the middle of the table, pointing toward me. He pulled the walking stick away, re-

tracted the needle, and placed his right hand about two inches away from the pistol.

There was a short silence during which I made several mental charges for the door, knowing I couldn't make it. When I got tired of hearing the pulse pound in my temples, I held out my hands and managed a bland smile.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"What?"

"I said, what are we going to do now?"

He took two or three short breaths, groaning softly, and began to massage his left hip frantically.

"I don't know. Oh, God" he cried. "I can't stand this pain."

He pounded the table with the walking stick, bouncing the .45 to the floor, clenching his teeth and grimacing in agony. He swept the pistol from under the table, chambered a round and pointed it at my face.

"Get out!" he yelled. "Go outside and wait until I tell you to come back in! But don't try to run away. I'll kill you, Richard, I swear it! Go."

He pushed me away, refused to let me get my coat, shoved me onto the front porch, then bolted the door behind me. I could hear him slamming cabinets and pushing things around, cursing and crying out in pain. I stood beside the door until he grew quiet, then stepped to the nearest window and looked in.

He was sitting at the table with his sleeve rolled up and a rubber cord twisted tightly around his left bicep. In his right hand he held a hypodermic syringe with which he was injecting a milky liquid into a vein. His face was contorted in anguish, tears streaming down his cheeks, his lips drawn across his teeth in pain. He looked toward the window, saw me watching, and bent back to the needle, weeping openly, his crumpled body racked with great, uncontrollable spasms.

He made no attempt to prevent me from watching as he drove the plunger down, unwound the cord and sank back in the chair with his mouth open, gulping air and moaning until the medicine, the narcotic, pumped through his body, into his tortured brain, and took the pain away.

Relaxing slowly, slumping, sagging, he melted into a peaceful stupor, neither awake nor asleep, neither dead nor living. His head rolled drunkenly, awkwardly, his mouth hung slack, spittle dripping from his lips, tears drying on his face. Suddenly he began to quiver, thrust his hips forward, and urinated in his trousers.

My stomach churned, seeing him like that, and I had to fight off a wave of vertigo. I stepped away from the window and groped for the porch railing, afraid I was going to be sick, reeled off the porch and ran for the corral, shivering in the chill air.

The mare skittered away from me as I bolted toward her trying to grab her mane. She reared and shied, tossing her head, fighting me, frightened by my flailing arms. The saddle. The blanket. The bridle. Where were they? Where had I put them? In the shed? No, I had left them on the railing under the sun shade. I turned to get them, saw Calhoun standing at the back door watching me. He was

smiling, lost in some reverie, floating in a fogbank somewhere. Just him and his walking stick. Gone were the pain and memories. Gone were the hatred and bitterness; gone, too, were any thoughts of killing.

He waved to me, beckoned for me to come back to the cabin, then disappeared inside. I stood in silent shock, looking at the empty doorway, wondering what he was doing in there, wondering if I could get back in for my coat and the .45 without getting stabbed with his stick.

I turned back to the saddle when I spotted two riders coming hell bent for Texas down the slope behind the cabin. I froze, fearing the worst, expecting to see a puff of smoke, hear the thump of a slug as it crushed my chest. As they neared, I could see one of the men was Max Hanks, whom I had met on the river the previous day. The other man was small, slight like a young boy, and was waving his hat over his head.

I backed away, broke for the gate and ran shouting down to the cabin, trying to alert Calhoun. He stepped into the doorway dressed in clean clothes just as I slid down the incline. One hand was behind his back and I could see he was holding my .45 out of sight beside his butt. When he saw Hanks, he smiled broadly, handed me the pistol and staggered out to greet his visitors.

Hanks clapped him on the back and led him around the far side of the corral, bending close and talking to Calhoun in animated whispers.

The young man, the boy, slid off his horse and trotted down toward the cabin where I was standing stupidly looking from the pistol to Calhoun and Hanks walking around the corral without a care in the world. I suddenly felt like I'd been projected into someone else's nightmare and I couldn't figure out who to shake so we could end it.

When the person I thought was a kid got closer I saw it was Brandy, smiling apprehensively with her eyes wide in a gesture of wonder. All I could do was hold out my arms and let her fall inside, embracing me and petting me, pressing her face against my neck. I wrapped my arms around her tightly, nearly breaking her bones, until she groaned breathlessly for me to let go. She stepped away, peering into my eyes questioningly. I shook my head sadly, barely able to keep from falling apart.

"He's nuts," I said. "Stark, raving mad."

Brandy took my arm and led me away from the cabin toward the forest above the river, asking questions and listening to my answers. I told her about Calhoun, his highs and lows, his technicolor dreams, his anger and rage, his sensitive memories, his dependency on some narcotic to kill the pain in his shattered pelvis. We sat on a stump, she holding me close and nodding patiently as the words tumbled out, the events all mixed up and out of order, until I was finished. When I looked at her, she put her hands to the sides of my face and kissed me tenderly and long, just taking my breath away.

"It's time to go home," I said at length. "All the bitterness and hatred is burned out of me now, Peach. I want to go away and let him live or die in peace."

She was quiet for a time, looking away toward the river, chewing at a piece

of dry skin on her lower lip.

"I don't think we can," she said. "Not right away anyhow."

"Why not?"

"Those four guys have followed us around for months waiting for us to lead them to Dallas. I think they're after the money."

She told me she had broken into their motor home an hour after we had departed and found papers and dossiers in the closets. She had turned on the computers, got a direct line to DICE, ran a keyword search profile and found operation Capricorn still active, the participants still alive, and Calhoun's records virtually stuffed with new information, a certain sign he was still an active operative for the agency.

She found Max Hanks at the ranger station and asked him to lead her to the cabin. After explaining why, Hanks, who had been caring for Calhoun since his arrival on the mountain, and who was planning to return anyway to find out who I was, tossed one of the hunters off his mount, flung her into the saddle, and thrashed the weary horses back up the mountain.

She told the story as they rode, trusting Hanks with some inner intuition only women possess, feeling by his urgency he would do what he could to prevent the four agents from finding Calhoun.

Dallas and Max appeared around the side of the cabin as she finished her story and we rose to meet them. Hanks had his arm around Calhoun's waist, and Calhoun leaned on him heavily as they made their way toward us.

"This is Helen's uncle Max," Calhoun said as they drew near. "That's Richard Constable."

Hanks extended a meaty fist and shook my hand, then jerked his head toward the river. "Tracks say four men are headed this way along the Selway," he said.

"They must not have been able to make it up to the trail at the switchback. It'll take 'em a while to get here, I reckon."

I asked him if he was sure he saw only four tracks, explaining that they had a guide. He assured me he could count four sets of horse tracks, but offered no explanation for the fate of the fifth rider or the pack horses.

Four horses could have meant four riders and no pack horses, or a couple of each. If they had left the pack horses somewhere, I figured they were going to get real hungry before they found the cabin.

"How do you think they got this far?" I asked presently.

"Damned if I know, man. But they stayed right down on the shore all the way as far as I can tell. We could see their trail nearly to the rest camp, and they angled off toward the river instead of taking the switchback. They're moving slow, horses are taking real short steps, like the riders don't know much how to handle them. That sound like your neighbors?"

I nodded, explaining that a couple of them had nearly fallen off before we got to the rock bar.

"Well, they won't get here before morning if they ride all night. If they stop to sleep, they might not get here until day after tomorrow as slow as they're moving," Hanks offered. "But I'm hanged if I

know where they'll spend the night down there. Look, can you help Dallas to the cabin? I have to tend to the horses before they keel over."

I took Calhoun's arm and Hanks trotted off to the corral while Brandy and I walked him up the hill. Calhoun seemed lucid but his legs were like rubber and he had a tough time navigating the fifty yards back to the door. We were practically dragging him by the time we made it, huffing and grunting up the steps. I held him upright while Brandy ran around to unbolt the door.

"You won't tell her what happened, will you, Richard?" he asked drunkenly after she was out of hearing.

"No, but you're coming down with us if I have to tie you up and take you down as baggage."

"Not in a million years, pal," he said. "If I'm going to die, I'm going to die right here on this mountain."

I was drawing a breath to tell him I thought he was already dead but too damned stupid to fall over when the lock clicked and Brandy swung the door open.

I helped Calhoun to a chair while Brandy stood with her hands on her hips surveying the interior of the cabin. She looked at the walls, looked at the frayed rugs on the floor, looked at the dirt and dust covering every horizontal surface, looked at the grime on the windows and range, studied the dirty dishes in the dirty sink, the dirty clothes on the dirty bed down the dirty hallway, the ashes spilling onto the filthy hearth.

Calhoun looked at me balefully, back to Brandy, back to me and sighed. "See what you've done now?" he said.

Brandy strode over and looked down at him with scolding eyes; just looking at him, not saying anything, until he looked away, then she walked through the cabin casting a critical eye at everything she found. Table with two chairs. A tiny desk piled with papers so the top was invisible. A kerosene heater standing in the middle of the bedroom, black and rusty. She eyed the sagging bed shoved against the wall and propped up at one corner with a half-dozen books. The rumpled covers and wrinkled sheets.

"That's your bed, then?" she asked.

"Yes, the bed," Calhoun moaned. "I don't make it up as you can see. It takes too much time. Besides, I like to crawl into an unmade bed; there's something inviting about an unmade bed."

"Well, it looks comfortable."

"Yes, it is; it's comfortable."

Kerosene lamps. One on the wall by the door, another on the writing table, hidden by piles of aborted letters. The odor of lamp oil and liniment and musty leather. Soiled clothing littering the floors in his bedroom or draped across the chair no one ever sat in.

"Not very tidy, I'm afraid," he was forced to apologize.

"But comfortable. Lived in."

"Comfortable. Yes."

Brandy searched for a place to sit where she wouldn't soil her clothing, pretending she didn't smell the rancid chicken bones rotting in the paper bag Calhoun used for a trash bin or the molded fruit peelings in the corner, then shook her head and went into the kitchen and began searching for all the stuff she needed to wash the dishes.

"It's what women have to do sometimes," I said by way of offering an explanation.

"I know."

I got a couple of beers from the pantry and sat down with him, twisted off the caps and slid a bottle his way. I was getting used to warm beer. It was scary.

We sat quietly for a while, each of us working on our own thoughts, until he reached over and put a hand on my arm. His mouth moved silently as he tried to get some thought set up in his mind, his eyes cloudy and vacant again as he rode out the hours toward the pain he could not endure.

"See why I can't go back, Richard?" he asked finally. "I'd be tied up in a looney bin someplace until they figured out a way to get me off narcotics, or until someone figured out a way to kill me. I can't do that."

"How did this happen, Dallas? I mean, how did you start using that stuff?"

He puffed, drawing his hand away. "How do you think? When Max got me out of the hospital I was still in a body cast up to my neck for Christ's sake. That bullet shattered my pelvis so bad there was no place for the hip joint to fit anymore. It was just floating around in there along with a couple of hundred bone chips and a few pieces of lead. I wouldn't let him take me to a doctor for months because I was afraid every agent in the country would be waiting for me to show up asking for help. It's true; that's what they were all doing right then, waiting for me to come dragging in to see a doctor.

"Max had a Gulfstar waiting at Lindberg Field that night and drove me over in a carryall; one of those vans with no goddamned seats. I was rolling around all over the place; it screwed me up something terrible. I passed out from the pain and they kept me unconscious all the way to Seattle where they loaded me into an ambulance and brought me here. The trip up the mountain nearly killed me, man. I was begging them to put a bullet in my brain.

"I paid some private nurse a thousand dollars a week to come up here and take care of me for most of a year. It took that long before I was able to walk as well as I do now. Max would drive us to Lewiston once in awhile so a doctor could see how the hip was mending. He wanted to admit me to the hospital, but I wouldn't do it."

I nodded, wondering if he thought getting out of the agency was worth what he was going through now. "But how did you get hooked on the narcotics?" I asked again.

"The nurse got it for me when she figured out nothing else was going to work. She would fly to Seattle and come back with it. I don't even know what it really is; there are no labels on the bottles. Now Max drives to the post office in Lewiston once a month to pick it up. The nurse sends it from Seattle. I'm still paying her a thousand dollars a week for the stuff. But if I didn't have it, I'd die from the pain."

He closed his eyes and sighed, shaking his head and wringing his hands. When he opened them, he looked toward the kitchen where Brandy was putting away the dishes.

"Come here, Brandy," he called. "Sit with us and tell me how you've been,

what you've been doing since I saw you last. When was that?"

"At Edwards Air Force Base back in 1984 I think," she answered as she pulled up my lap and sat down.

"I believe you're right. God, that seems a long time ago, doesn't it?" He fell silent, his eyes fixed on one of her earrings while he worked his mind back to that day. He cleared his throat and snapped back to the present. "You'd think we'd have come farther than this in all that time, wouldn't you?" he said sadly.

"We could have if the agency would leave us alone, if Richard would think about going fishing instead of working for people like you." She smiled wryly and punched me on the arm hard enough to let me know she was angry with me for wasting the two years.

"Don't blame Richard too much, Brandy," he said, patting her hand. "I suspect none of this is any of his fault, not that it relieves him of any responsibility. But I think the agency would have maneuvered him into something else if he hadn't come looking for me. He may not have...."

He paused suddenly, holding a finger to his lips. Very slowly he turned toward the door, his eyes intense and searching. "Hear that?" he asked.

"What?" Brandy whispered.

"Shhh. Listen."

We strained to hear what he thought he was hearing, but neither of us could pick it out. Brandy and I exchanged worried glances and she slid off my lap thinking he might lapse into one of his fits of violence.

"Wait; listen," he whispered again. "There, hear that?"

I shrugged.

Brandy started to shake her head, then stopped, cocking her head and narrowing her eyes. "It's a cat," she said.

Calhoun laughed, stopped, then began laughing again. "Yes," he cried. "It's Cat, it's Cat."

He pushed himself out of the chair and limped to the door, waiting with his hand poised inches from the knob. Brandy raised her eyebrows at me but I put a finger to my lips and shook my head.

Moments later we heard a pat, pat, pat at the door and Calhoun nearly knocked himself over pulling it open. A thin, shiny black cat started through the door but stopped when she saw us, crouched and froze with her green eyes dancing until Calhoun reached down and picked her up, clutching her to his chest as he made his way back to the table.

"You see, Richard," he said, holding the cat out so we could look at her. "There really is a cat. Cat, this is Richard and Brandy. This is Cat." He sat down, scratching her chin and pulling her cheeks. She went into fits of ecstacy, purring and stretching, digging her claws into his legs.

"What's her name?" Brandy asked as she stroked the cat's head.

"Cat," Calhoun said.

"Cat?" Brandy asked.

"Cat," I nodded insipidly.

Brandy sat on my lap again, watching the cat carefully. "Where did you get it?" she asked presently.

Calhoun told her the story, word perfect, just as he had told me. By the time

he was finished I was almost mouthing his words, realizing for the first time that he'd had nothing better to do for a year than learn how to walk and play word fantasies with himself while he drifted in and out of narcotic dreams.

A moment later Max came clumping through the back door drying his hands on his trousers and puffing clouds of steam. He walked to the fireplace and held his red hands close to the fire for a minute, rubbing the circulation back into them.

"How are you feeling now, Dallas?" he asked.

"I'm okay, Max. Look, Cat came back." He held Cat up so Max could see.

"I'm glad. Shouldn't you feed her?"

Calhoun looked puzzled for a moment, then got up and went to the kitchen to search for something to feed the cat, talking to it, asking it where it had been for a week, asking what it had seen and how many squirrels it had slain. Then he began to tell the cat about us.

While he rummaged around, Max sat down in the vacated chair and leaned forward with his face a few inches from mine. He touched his head with the tip of an index finger.

"He ain't right anymore," he whispered. "It's the medicine, I think."

"I know," I answered. "What are you doing to do about it?"

He shrugged. "What can I do? Every time I tell him he should go to a real doctor he wants to bash my head with that stick. I don't know what to do, don't know what to say anymore."

He sat back, ending the conversation, and began worming out of his coat. "We nearly kilt them horses," he said loud enough for Calhoun to hear in the kitchen. "I'm ashamed to say I did that, and I wouldn't have if I didn't know Calhoun might be in trouble. If I had any sense, I'd move up here with him and not make that damned trip two or three times a week. Only problem is, he won't let me. Isn't that right, Dallas"

Calhoun walked around the corner and squinted at Max. "No, I won't," he said firmly. "I'd rather not have you up here, just in case the wrong people show up. I want all of you to leave in the morning. You, too, Richard. You proved your point and I want you to take Brandy back down the mountain and go home. Okay?"

I looked at Max and Brandy, then back to Calhoun. "Do you think that's a wise decision, Dallas? I mean, knowing those four knotheads are out there and what they might do?"

He walked up to Max and urged him out of the chair. "Get the two chairs from the porch, Max," he said as he sat down and turned to me. He poked a finger in the air between us and got serious.

"Let's talk reality here for a minute, Constable," he growled. "This morning when I found you outside my door with a pistol in your pocket, I figured you had come up here with the thought in mind to kill me. No, wait. I don't want to hear any explanations; you already told me. But the truth is, you came up here thinking you would kill me if you felt justified in your own mind to do so. Am I right or wrong?"

I squirmed a little. "Well, I... ."

"Exactly," he interrupted. "Then you see me here all busted up and walking with a stick. You see me crying, you lis-

ten to my life story—which I don't remember ever finishing—and you see I have to take medicine every few hours to keep from cutting my own throat from the pain. Maybe you wanted to throw up; I don't know. Max did, more than once. The nurse did; that's why she quit coming up here.

"I know what I was, I know what I am, and I know what will become of me. One of these days, if someone from the agency doesn't get up here to kill me, one of these days Max will drive to Lewiston and there won't be any medicine in the post office box.

"You think I don't know it's some kind of illegal narcotic? You think I don't know that one day the nurse will get caught and go to jail? I can't survive the pain on aspirin, Richard, and there isn't enough booze in the world to make it go away.

"Even if there was no pain, even if I could make it disappear overnight, I still have this addiction to narcotics to deal with. What do I do about that?"

"Go to a hospital," Brandy said passionately. "Get some professional help."

Max pushed Brandy a chair and she slid off my lap as he pulled his over in front of the fireplace. Calhoun looked at me in despair.

"How long do you think I'd live after the agency found out I was in a hospital?" he asked. "Tell her, Richard."

I explained it as well as I could, which wasn't very well since I still had an idea he could use another identity and get away with it. Not here, in America, but somewhere in Europe. I told him how I felt about it but he waved away the idea and sagged heavily against the back of the chair.

"Actually," he said with an exhausted sigh, "I'm tired of explaining it over and over. I'm not going back down the mountain, I'm not going to a hospital, and I'm not going to try to go somewhere and do this all over again so you might as well just shut up about it. I'm tired; sick and tired. Maybe it's time to die."

Brandy was looking at the floor, digging at her nails. Max was leaning back in his chair with his arms behind his head, eyes closed as if asleep. I was leaning on the table staring at Calhoun, and Calhoun was sagging in his chair watching me.

None of us seemed to know what to say or do so we said and did nothing. We sat in silence and listened to our own hearts beating, listened to our own breathing, hearing the house creak and the wind moaning outside in the darkening forest.

We should have been on the brink of something great, should have been rejoicing at the beauty of life, should have been traveling, seeing the world, laughing and having one hell of a good time. Calhoun and Max had a hundred million dollars hidden somewhere—minus a pinch for the nurse and her illicit drugs. Brandy and I still had more than eighty thousand dollars of the money the agency paid us to help mop up the mess Colonel Fourney had created. We could have been having the best ride of our lives.

But we weren't. We were holed up in a shack on the side of a mountain waiting for four assassins to climb up from the river and start sawing the cabin apart with automatic weapons.

Think about it for a minute.

Max tilted his chair down, squatted before the hearth and began banking the fire, tossing on some fat logs and covering them with ashes so they'd burn all night. Then he walked around to all the windows and let the heavy wooden doors down, locking them with steel pins so no one could push them in from the outside, bolting the front door as he passed. He did all that while we sat and watched with our tongues tied.

Calhoun got up to light a lantern on the mantle, then handed me a candle and went out the back door, headed for the john behind the corral. The cat scooted out behind him, vanishing instantly in the dim evening light.

When he was gone, Max wandered back to his chair and sat down. "You see?" he said, tapping his temple. "He's gone around the bend."

"Can't we persuade him to go back with us'" Brandy asked. "Maybe we could wait until he's unconscious or something."

"He'd likely kill us all before he'd let us do that," Max said gloomily. "He ain't right upstairs, I tell you; he ain't right at all. That's why my niece went to Europe without him. He got violent and fearsome, smashing things and threatening to kill them all. Kids, too. He doesn't blame her for leaving, but I know he misses them like unholy hell. I've seen him crying like a child, rocking back and forth in that swing out there, calling their names and screaming at the sky."

He shook his head sadly. "No, he ain't right anymore."

We all took turns walking to the little shed at the edge of the forest before it got too dark to see the trail then Max helped Brandy and I straighten up the double bed in the back bedroom. After we were finished, he wadded an armload of comforters against his chest and went back to the living room to make a pallet on the floor. Calhoun had wandered into the small bedroom and sank face first onto the unmade bed, falling asleep almost immediately.

Brandy and I stayed awake, waiting until Max had puffed out his candle and was snoring softly. I was on my back and she had snuggled up against me with her arm across my chest and one leg over my thighs, worming into the heavy comforters with her face inches from my ear.

"What are we going to do tomorrow?" she whispered.

I shrugged under the covers. "I don't know, Peach. I want to help Calhoun but I want to get you away from here, too. I think I'll take you back down the mountain, load up the rig and head for San Diego."

It was the only sane thing I could think of. Staying to help Calhoun repulse the attack of the four agents seemed stupid, if honorable, since the only weapons in the cabin were my .45 and the .44 caliber flintlock which probably hadn't been fired since the uncivil War. I had fifty rounds for the Colt and I was certain there were no powder and balls for the Kentucky long rifle within a hundred miles of us.

The four agents would likely uncase a few M-16s, maybe an M-60 light machine gun or two, grenade launchers, plastic explosives, and all the ammunition they could carry.

"But they aren't bringing the pack horses," Brandy suggested.

"Maybe; maybe not. Could be two of them are riding up with two pack horses while the other two go back to the motor home for more weapons. They might want to contact the agency, too, to tell them they've found Calhoun."

Brandy cleared her throat lightly. "Ummm, they're going to have a tough time doing that," she said.

"Why?"

"I ran a hammer around the inside of their computer, the one they'd have to use to call in. They aren't going to use it this time out. But I made a call before I did."

I turned sideways and peered into the darkness for her eyes. "To whom?" I asked, knowing only one person on the other end she felt she might trust.

"Steve Dansforth," she said timidly.

"Steve Dansforth," I repeated grimly. I turned away, huffing with exasperation, and stared toward the ceiling. "You shouldn't have done that, Peach. Now he'll know where Calhoun is and if he comes up or sends some more of his people, well, we won't have a chance of stopping them."

"He didn't know what I was talking about, Richard, and, besides, I didn't mention a word about Calhoun. I just told him we were in big trouble and needed help."

"What's he going to do?" I turned back toward her.

"He said he'd call the Boise station and try to get an assault team up here."

"You're kidding!"

"Shhh. No, but he said it might be a while before they get here, maybe tomorrow evening."

If the four agents making their way along the river were determined to kill Calhoun, and were hardy enough to travel all night, the following evening could be too late. It was rugged country, but I figured they could make it to the cabin by sunrise if they kept at it.

I rubbed my eyes and put one arm around Brandy and pulled her close.

"Well then, we'll see what happens tomorrow, sweetheart. Now we'd better get some sleep if we're going to be any good tomorrow."

EIGHT

Pans clattering in the kitchen and someone going out the back door startled me awake. I sat up, found the cat sleeping between my knees, unhooked her claws from the comforters, and put her on the floor. She yawned, stretched, primped for about three seconds trying to wash the human scent from her fur, then jumped back onto the bed, watching me with icy disdain while I found my clothes.

I dressed and wandered into the kitchen where Brandy and Calhoun were sitting at the table chatting. Their breakfast dishes were stacked in the sink and Brandy was casually drinking coffee and listening to Calhoun talk about his life, nodding and humming while he expressed his philosophies on just about everything imaginable. I had an eerie feeling he was trying to tell us as much as he could in case his life experiences ended sometime in the next few hours.

Brandy held up a hand to stop him, then pointed to the wood-burning range. "There's a pan of hot water and a wash

cloth for your face, and your breakfast is warming in the oven." She turned back to Calhoun and rested her chin in the palm of one hand.

"Why didn't you wake me?" I asked.

"You were sleeping better than I've seen you sleep in months. I thought I'd let you wake up naturally."

Her eyes flashed to Calhoun. "Go ahead," she said.

"Where was I?" he asked with a perplexed frown.

"You were telling me how you felt when Jessica said you couldn't see her again," Brandy reminded him.

I began washing my hands and face, wondering how long they'd been sitting there talking, listened with half my mind as he retold part of the story I'd heard the previous day, then fetched my breakfast of scrambled eggs and Spam and went over to join them.

"I was devastated, of course. Shattered; completely destroyed," Calhoun began. "I contemplated suicide. I considered murder. I thought of confronting her husband, revealing all, thinking he would divorce her, so I could have her for myself.

"I did none of those things, however. I went to my room and wept for days until all my anguish was gone. Then I cleaned myself up, got a hold of my thoughts and began sending resumes to the law firms all over again. I'd been out of work about ten months when she left me.

"I missed her terribly for awhile but I learned to live with that and eventually the deep longing I had for her slipped away. I still loved her, do even now, but I came to realize that I could never have her.

"The problem with ended love affairs is that when we part, whether as friends or enemies, we let each other drift away without a clear plan for the future. In a sense, when a love affair is over, we tend simply to discard the other person as we would a piece of worn out clothing or a pair of socks with too many holes in them.

"I thought Jessica had done that to me but I was determined not to do it to her. I carried the memories away with me; have them to this day, as vividly now as they were then. Did I tell you about Caroline?"

"Yes, you did," Brandy replied, repeating a little part of the story so he would know.

He smiled. "I probably should have gone back and married her. It's too late for that now, though, isn't it?"

He turned away from her and patted me on the shoulder. "Did you have enough to eat, Richard?" he asked.

I nodded, slid my plate into the sink, and scooted over beside Brandy, holding her hand against my thigh.

Calhoun smiled at us, a pleasant smile, like a grandfather watching his two loving grandchildren. I smiled back uncomfortably.

"Did you ever see her again?" Brandy asked and I nudged her leg under the table.

"Well," she said to me, "I want to know."

"It's okay," Calhoun said to me. "I haven't had a more receptive audience in my life and I feel like telling her.

"I saw her once more, Brandy, and only from a distance after I'd joined the

agency, after they'd recruited me. I was walking to the entrance of the Library of Congress when she and a man were getting into a car with an infant and a young girl about sixteen years old. I hadn't seen her for nearly two years, but I recognized her immediately. I mean, I would have known who she was from the back, you see? I had every feature of her form imprinted on my brain, and knew immediately it was Jessica.

"I almost cried out in surprise. I'm not certain what stopped me; the man, I suppose, or the young girl. No, no. It was the infant; I would have cried out to her had it not been for the infant, a baby about a year old. I paused at the walkway, thirty feet away, perhaps, and watched them while I pretended to consult some papers I was carrying.

"Jessica turned for only an instant and saw me. I believe she was dumbfounded; I know I was. For a second or two—it seemed forever—we looked at each other, then she cocked her head and got the most quizzical look on her face like she thought she had seen me somewhere before but couldn't remember where.

"Then the girl, who had already got into the car, took her hand and said, 'Come on, mother; what's wrong?'And the man asked her, 'Jessica, what is it?' She replied it was nothing, she only thought she saw someone she knew, one of her friends' husbands.

"I looked away when the man turned toward me so he wouldn't catch me staring. Then they got into the car and the chauffeur drove them away. It was the last time I ever saw her. But I realized that she wasn't just five or six years older than I was; she was ten or twelve years older if the girl was her daughter, if she was the mother.

"I think she was for the girl had her features, you see, and she had called her mother. It's odd, but I didn't care that she was that much older. I didn't care at all."

Brandy put her finger beside her nose and frowned at him for a moment. "But I thought you said you met her in Boston. What was she doing in Washington, D.C.?"

"I wondered the same thing, Brandy," he said. "I saw the license plates on the car—it was a big deal for us to remember and trace license numbers—so I checked it out."

He looked away, studying the room Brandy had cleaned while I slept, ran his finger idly across the top of the table and inspected it for dust. Presently he turned back to her.

"The car was one of those private limos the agency provided for top echelon staff members assigned to foreign offices so they'd have ready transportation while they were here in the States. But I was never able to discover who they had assigned the vehicle to that afternoon and, although I assumed the man was her husband, I was never able to confirm it. Whoever he was, the agency was keeping a lid on the purpose of his visit and, beyond knowing that he worked for the agency in some capacity, my inquiries led to dead-ends.

"I found out some years later that Jessica had put in a good word for me somehow, and prompted the agency to evaluate me as a potential candidate."

"Oh, Calhoun!" Brandy moaned, "Why would she do such a thing?"

Calhoun shrugged a sad little shrug and tapped the table with the pads of his fingers, brief rhythm like a horse running. "I suppose it was her way of rewarding me for being so gallant while we were together and when we parted. She couldn't fall in love with me because she was married, but she often told me she loved me.

"Paradoxical, is it not? She knew I was not working. It's all I talked about when I was not talking about us and I suppose she saw a way to do something for me, get me a job. The agency had already approached me and she knew it. After she left, I sent resumes to some law firms, but when the agency approached me again, I simply accepted their offer."

"And you never saw her again after that, even though her husband was with the agency?" Brandy asked. "I'd think your paths would have crossed again somewhere."

"No, I never saw her again, and I never tried to find her. I saw the gesture as a final offering of love, a final goodbye. I could hardly seek her out to thank her, could I?"

Brandy shrugged. "No, I guess not."

"But I'll never forget her face as they drove away, Calhoun continued. "She looked back, out the rear window, as the car pulled from the curb, and she still had that puzzled look on her face like she was trying to remember where she'd met me. It makes me wonder how many others she'd known before she made love to me."

"You must hate her for it," Brandy growled.

"Not at all, dear," he replied, smiling bravely. "Not at all. If I felt anything at that moment, it was dismay, I think, because she apparently couldn't remember who I was. Nothing is quite so damaging to the libido than to know one is so completely unnoteworthy as a lover. But, no, I do not hate her; I love her still, and just as ardently as I did then. She let me share something beautiful with her, something I know I'll never have again, even if I live to be a hundred. She forced me to look in upon myself, to discover what I was, to see what I could become. I'm certain she will never know it, but she created, by leaving, by not remembering, a new Dallas Calhoun, a new personality.

"Discovering that personality was something like being born again. I broke the fragile sack that held all my previous life, washed away the dreams that had sustained me up to that time, and leaped into the world determined to begin anew and to do it right.

"But, oh, my God, it is a fearful thing to be born again and know you are facing the world alone and on its own terms. I was free from myself, free from the old Calhoun, free from the torment of my sister's death, free from the vengeance that had driven me for years, and realized, for the first time, who I was.

"Who were you?" Brandy and I asked in unison, she with enthusiastic curiosity; I with deplorable boredom.

"I was me! Dallas Houston Calhoun, human being, child of the Universe, free to do anything I wanted to do, unique in all the cosmos, a magic creature against whom nothing could stand should I will it. I stopped the universe, rebuilt it, structuring it to suit myself, and began life anew.

"God, but I felt invincible! Immortal! And, in a way, I suppose I am."

I watched him carefully, expecting him to leap from the chair, swing the club in a great are above his head, and call down fearful lightning to strike us dead.

"Are you, Calhoun? Do you feel immortal?" I asked as he trembled on the edge of an hallucination.

"I am in here," he answered, tapping the side of his head.

Brandy and I exchanged knowing glances and she rose quietly to wash the cups and saucers up and brush the crumbs away. I scratched the side of my face, begged an excuse, and headed for the little building out back, wondering why no one had mentioned our proposed departure.

There is a point in our lives where we must pause and redefine ourselves as human beings, unique and separate, yet, somehow, connected to all the other human beings we've met, whether we've loved them or hated them. Such introspection, and the decisions derived from it, broadens our choices while narrowing the paths we may take on our journey through life.

That fleeting glance into myself came for me one evening in an isolation cell at Ton Son Nuht Air Force Base near Saigon, Vietnam. I have but to close my eyes and the image of the cold, austere room springs unbidden to my mind, as clear today as it was twenty years ago.

With the exception of Lieutenant Hood, I never knew the names of those team members, but their faces will hang in little gold frames right here behind my eyes until I draw my last breath.

When desperation overcame me, I squatted in the corner making promises to God I knew I would never keep, searching for the reasons for my incarceration, the meaningless rationale for the patrol, the meaning, the cause and effect of my participation, some redeeming factor for living while tears streamed down my face and I rocked back and forth in the darkness beside the locked door.

But God never answered the questions, never acknowledged the promises, made no sign in the darkened room that IT even cared whether I lived or died. There were no flashes of inspiration, no sounds of superhuman voices from the sky, no descending orbs of light to comfort and succor me. The answer came from myself, from a future Richard Constable who somehow managed to project himself to that miserable tiny cell on the other side of the planet, on the back side of time and space.

And the only thing the future me said during that brief visit was that every man is expected to look after his own soul and none other.

That and nothing else.

Experience changes us in very definite ways, but no two people are ever changed the same way by virtue of having shared the same adventure. Because we experience them in different ways, our reactions and the memories we carry away, are not the same as our fellow travellers.

Calhoun and I had shared more in the brief period since we had met than most people do in a lifetime. Things that filled me with awe and fear filled him with excitement and a sense of adventure. That's because he prepared himself for the in-

cidents we encountered while I did not. He anticipated surprises and confrontations, even planned them against others, while I was always surprised by them. I don't like surprises; I'm just not very flexible about them. I want continuity, things constantly changing, evolving into something else, but connected, so life doesn't seem to be a series of disjointed, uncontrollable vignettes.

But Calhoun thrived on the unexpected. He was a participant, I a pawn, in the deadly game of intrigue.

'Never assume your travelling companions know what they're doing,' he once told me, 'because they usually know as little as you, and often much less.'

That was just another way of saying every man has to look after his own soul the way I see it.

I couldn't imagine Calhoun doing anything else, even now. When he was lucid, he was chillingly, frighteningly coherent and calculating, like the Calhoun I used to know, and when he was enraged with pain, he was convincingly violent; a madman who tore up the house and waved a pistol in my face, but never quite insane enough to pull the trigger.

What could explain his aberrant behavior? What prompted this normally quite, inscrutable man to tell us his life story—if that's what it was—when he had no need to do so? There seemed no point to his rambling monologues except to reinforce the idea that he was a man gone mad. Was that an act, a distraction, to keep us off-guard and looking in the wrong direction?

He was either on the verge of insanity and wanted me to know it, or he was completely sane and didn't want me to find out. Sometimes he limped as he walked; sometimes he did not. Maybe that was the narcotics working on him; maybe not. He seemed to have slept the night peacefully, not requiring them to ease his pain. Maybe it worked that way. Maybe being off his feet for several hours made the pain tolerable so he could sleep without it.

Maybe.

Max Hanks, if he was really Helen Calhoun's uncle, was doing a splendid job of supporting Calhoun's act, reminding us that Dallas was nuttier than a fruitcake every time he was out of sight.

But who was Max Hanks if not Helen's uncle? A brother spook, someone who had, himself, retired or defected from the agency? Someone who could relate to Calhoun's predicament and wanted to help? Someone who hoped to get his mitts on the one hundred million dollars hidden somewhere?

Another thing that had not escaped my notice was their apparent lack of concern about the four agents who were supposed to be crawling up the mountain to kill us. Neither of them seemed worried enough to make any kind of preparations to repel an attack. Now that was insane, and I didn't feel like Brandy and I should be a part of it. If we were going to make a stand, if we had weapons to fire, fine; I'd send Brandy down the hill and do what I could to stop the four men. If it was up to me, I'd make a reconnaissance of the mountain, find a likely place to ambush them, and pick them off one by one, running and shooting, withdrawing and attacking, until they were dead or in retreat.

But, then, who ever said it wasn't up

to me to make that kind of decision? I had the only weapon, Max had disappeared and, if he was really buggers, Calhoun hadn't the capacity to make his bed, to say nothing of a plan to save his own life. Maybe it was up to me, after all. Anything was better than waiting around to see what was going to happen. I've never heard of a war won that way. Vietnam proved that.

I walked back to the cabin, drew Brandy aside and told her I was going to take a little walk down by the river to see what I could see. She protested, of course, but I convinced her of the wisdom of it, patted her bottom and gave her the con.

Calhoun was sitting in the porch swing scratching the cat and ranting about the brain's capacity to accommodate madness when I eased around the side of the cabin and headed for the cedars. But I wasn't sharp enough or quick enough to slip out of sight before he spotted me and called out.

"Richard," he shouted, "where are you going? If you're taking a walk, I'd like to go with you so I can try to loosen up this hip." He shoved the cat to Brandy and hobbled off the porch to join me.

I waited until he drew along side then lied, saying that I needed some time to myself so I could think, but he wasn't buying the story. In the end, I relented, wagged my head as I waited for him to catch up with me as I looked back toward Brandy and shrugged.

We walked five minutes in silence, then he cleared his throat as though he had something important to say, holding my arm to slow me down as he struggled with the walking stick on the damp path.

"It's time I told you the rest of the story about Jessica," he said quietly. "I promised I'd tell you how I joined the agency, why I stayed as long as I did, and why I decided to leave. And you agreed to listen. I know you find it disgustingly inane but I want you to know; I have to tell someone before there is no more time. You know what I mean?"

I nodded. Yeah, I knew what he meant. If the four agents made it to the cabin, the time for talking would be over. None of them would wait long enough to hear the story before they made him a permanent part of the cabin walls.

Still, I couldn't help but feel he had joined me on the walk, not to bend my ear, but to keep me from wandering too far from the cabin, to keep me from seeing things I shouldn't see.

"Jessica didn't tell me her name until we had known each other for nearly a week," he said, beginning almost exactly where he had ended the story the previous day.

"We were together every afternoon and evening and, once, while we were making love, she told me her name was Jessica Wright. Until that moment I had called her 'darling' or 'love' or 'sweetheart'. I had imagined her name was Barbara or Susan; something like that.

"But suddenly she had a name and it was as though we had met for the first time. I would repeat her name constantly, hear it endlessly in my mind, see it imprinted before my eyes. I discovered her anew, not as a nameless stranger, but as Jessica Wright and it was even more marvellous than before.

"She had shared her secret name with me, you see, her magic name. It was

like the word of God falling on my senses. In the beginning was the word. God said let there be Jessica Wright and there was Jessica Wright. I imagined that it meant she was falling in love with me. But while she shared the name, she told me nothing of her private life, her husband, or her family. Those were things I had to discover for myself years later."

He paused, glanced down toward the river, his eyes sweeping a terraced path that led down the steep slope, an intense and thorough search. He tucked the walking stick under his arm, shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, smiled blandly, and continued walking around the perimeter of the clearing, quite obviously looking for suspicious footprints in the damp soil.

I fell in beside him, matching his slow, casual steps as we moved away from the cabin. Presently he resumed talking, speaking softly, pausing only to arrange events in chronological order.

He told me he'd been contacted by the agency in 1984 to assassinate the director of the London station because he was suspected of compromising secrets to foreign agents. Calhoun went to great lengths to explain how he'd rigged a bomb in the man's automobile and left for Heathrow Airport to catch a flight back to America.

"I knew the device would work," he said candidly. "I'd used them on other occasions so there was no need for me to stay. I caught an early flight and landed in Washington in time for dinner with Helen. I was working with Steve Dansforth at that time, so I hadn't time to do any research on the man I was contracted to kill. Had I the time, I would have discovered who he was and I may not have killed him. As it was, I had to return before Dansforth missed me. Fortunately, he didn't even know I'd left the country.

"Air travel; a man can be on both sides of the world in the same day."

A brief article in the newspapers attributing the car bombing death to an obscure terrorist group and fifty thousand dollars deposited at a prearranged drop satisfied Calhoun that he'd completed his mission successfully.

"But," he said mournfully, clearing his throat again, "I received a letter at the agency a week later from Jessica. It was a rambling, disjointed note, hastily written, in which she admitted she had lied to me when she told me her name was Wright. Wright was her maiden name, not her married name.

"She also revealed that she had gotten pregnant during our brief affair in Boston while her husband was travelling in Europe. The child, a boy, was born in London after she had joined him there. Her husband never knew it was not his own child. Then at the end of the letter, on a tear-stained page, she told me her husband, who was Director of the London station, had been killed by a car bomb.

"His name, by the way, was Tom Cheney."

I stopped in my tracks, staring at his back with my mouth open, frozen into dumbfounded immobility. He paused, waiting for me, gazing insouciantly at the clouds above the cool, green mountain. We stood that way for long moments, he staring at the cloud-laced azure sky; I mesmerized by the sight of him and what he'd told me.

The wind shivered through the forest, the river thundered four hundred feet below, a tit peeped in the alders behind us, and a whiskey jack complained noisily somewhere up on the ridge. The sounds blended and separated, blended again into an unbearable roaring. I felt a moment of vertigo, imagining myself suspended in space above us, looking down and wondering why I could not speak or move.

"The sad part is that Tom Cheney wasn't compromising our secrets, Richard," he said, breaking the spell, dashing me to earth. "It was someone else, but no one at the agency ever admitted the error; they simply moved another man into the position and went about their business as if nothing had happened.

"Ironic, isn't it?" he said so softly I scarcely heard. "I killed Tom Cheney not knowing he was Jessica's husband, and now my own son, the boy who thought Tom Cheney was his father, is here to kill me, not knowing who I am."

He fell silent, staring at the ground with his bottom lip pushed out remorsefully while he nudged pine needles into a pile with his feet. Presently he looked up at me, smiled with one side of his mouth, a tight, forced smile, and wagged his head.

"Come on," he said, "let's walk on before this hip gets stiff again."

We continued, each of us driven to silence by our morbid thoughts. At length we reached a point a quarter of a mile behind the cabin where the terrain grew steeper, rising into the timber on the ridge. Calhoun stopped, breathing heavily and leaning on the walking stick.

"This is the limit of my course," he said wearily. "I've never been able to negotiate the hill much beyond this point. Oh, I made it up to those boulders once, but I was so tired and weak I had to rest two hours before I could walk back to the cabin."

He waved the stick toward the trees and I followed the motion up a clear trail disappearing into the tangled undergrowth. It would have tested the mettle of a man with two good legs to reach the rocks a hundred feet above where the rocky outcropping embraced the dark shadows of a cave-like entrance.

"Shall we go back, then?" Calhoun offered, holding out an arm to show the way. I walked past him and he fell in beside me, limping slightly and moaning now and then.

"Want to rest awhile?" I suggested.

"No, no, I'll be okay."

We walked slowly, making our way carefully down the rock-strewn path, sidestepping soggy puddles and easing under low branches, completely circumnavigating the clearing until we arrived at the outhouse set under the trees. Calhoun was puffing and groaning by the time we got to the path leading to the cabin. I waited until he caught up, helping him through the brush with my arm hooked through his.

"Maybe he does know who you are, Dallas; have you thought about that?" I said as we began walking the last few yards to the back door. "Maybe that's why he's here."

Calhoun shook his head firmly. "Nope, they wouldn't let him come if that were the case. You know the agency doesn't let their operatives work on cases

in which they have a personal interest; it screws up their thinking, prevents them from reasoning logically. No, it would be too dangerous for him; he doesn't know."

"Then why are they here?" I asked as we rounded the corral. Calhoun inched along, using the railing for support and growling with exasperation at his infirmity.

"How the hell do I know? Maybe they're following you, trying to figure out what you're up to. They must know you didn't come here for vacation; it took you two months to get here, for Christ's sake. Let's stop."

He sat abruptly on the edge of the watering trough and put his head down until it was nearly touching his knees, moaning and rocking back and forth. He cursed loudly, pounding his left leg with a tight fist, began mumbling again about his time to die.

The pain he could not bear was pushing him once more to the brink of madness.

"Get me inside, Richard," he groaned, looking at me with desperate pleading. "Where's Brandy?"

"Inside, I imagine."

"Well, get her out, damn it. Take her someplace away from the cabin. I shouldn't have walked so far. Help me up."

I agonized him into the cabin, parked him against the pantry where he hid his narcotics, found Brandy dozing in the swing, and urged her into joining me for another tour of the clearing, explaining that Calhoun needed to rest for awhile.

She arched her eyebrows at me and shoved her hands into her coat pockets. "Does he need some help?" she asked.

"No, he's going to do his drugs again. He doesn't want any help and you don't want to see what happens. Let's just walk." I put my arm through hers and headed toward the perimeter trail.

"Where are we going?"

"Just walking. Where's Max?"

"I think he went down to the river, but I'm not sure. He headed off that way while I was nodding in the swing." She pointed toward the terraced path with her chin as we passed.

"How long has he been gone?

"I don't know; I slept for awhile. I woke up when he came back this morning, but he left again right after you and Calhoun did."

"About an hour, then," I said. "Look, let's walk on a ways until we're out of sight of the cabin, then I think I'll try to get down to the river and find out what Max is doing."

I told her about the trail up to the rocks Calhoun had once climbed, explaining that the path looked too well worn to have been used only occasionally, and that I'd seen what appeared to be a cave opening between the boulders. "Somebody goes up there fairly regularly," I said, "and it might be interesting to find out why. The trail is steep and the brush is thick; think you're up to having a look?"

"I'll try," she replied as she looked up the path. "What do you suppose I'll find?"

"I don't know," I said, releasing her arm. "It may be nothing more than a place to sit and rest. Take your time, be careful, and meet me back here when

you're finished."

She took a step and turned back toward me. "I forgot to tell you; Allison Haniford is out here somewhere."

"How do you know?"

"I heard Max telling Dallas early this morning before you two went walking."

That was interesting and I briefly wondered why Allison Haniford and Dallas Calhoun were always sharing the same patch. Find one and you're sure to find the other.

"Probably looking for us," I said.

I kissed her, patted her bottom, and watched her go, ducking into the undergrowth until she was out of sight, then made my way into the cedars and headed down toward the river.

NINE

If the one hundred foot climb into the rocks was going to be difficult for Brandy, the four hundred foot descent to the river was pure torture for me, and I understood immediately why someone had laboriously cut the steps into the path.

I tried to stay a few yards to the left of the path where possible, noting Max's telltale bootprints clearly pressed into the soft dirt. I didn't want him to see my own leading down when he came back up, didn't want him to know I'd gone down to check on him.

Slipping in the damp leaves and pine needles, clutching at branches and saplings to keep my footing, I plunged headlong down the steep incline, resting when I could stop sliding by jamming my feet against the bases of the trees and roots, leaning against boulders, hanging from branches.

I got on a boulder about fifty feet above the river and fell on my back, staring up through the trees at the sky until I caught my wind, then rolled over and peered dawn toward the bank trying to find Max, trying to figure out what he was doing there.

Perhaps, like me, he had decided to recon the trail to find out if the four agents had arrived. That would seem logical if Max were really there to help Calhoun. I couldn't see him anywhere but presently I heard a hollow thump as though something banged against the rocks near the shore. I've dragged wooden boats around long enough, trying to get them into or out of the water, to recognize the sound immediately. But there was only one direction anyone could take a boat on the Selway and that was down, toward the falls. I wondered why Max was down there messing with a boat. Was he planning on running the river? If so, why? And when?

I crawled along the shelf to get a better view and was just about to sit up when I heard a hissing sound behind me. I froze, wondering if I'd disturbed something venomous.

"Sssst," I heard again, and I eased down flat, searching the brush for whatever it was.

"Constable," somebody whispered.

"Where are you?" I whispered back.

"Up here hiding so you don't blow my head off." A pebble came sailing over the rocks above me and bounced off my shoulder. I recognized the voice.

"Moon? Is that you?" I hissed at the rock.

"Yes. Be quiet." Moon appeared on

the boulder above me, made hand signals to indicate someone was approaching from down river. Four people, walking and armed, to the left; one man waiting and armed to the right, his hands told me.

While I was interpreting the signs he eased over the ledge and dropped silently beside me with a finger to his lips. He had two .30 caliber M1A carbines and two bandoliers festooned with cartridges slung over his shoulders. On one hip he had a .30 caliber Ruger revolver and on the other a Marine Corps bayonet.

I appraised him cautiously as he unslung a carbine and one of the bandoliers and passed them to me, patting me on the shoulder and pointing through the trees below. The four agents hove into view freighted with backpacks and automatic weapons. I turned to Moon questioningly but he tapped his ear, indicating that we should listen now, talk later, so we turned our attention to the foursome who approached Max Hanks and began an animated conversation.

Max pointed to the path and made hand motions as though he were describing the layout of the cabin and surrounding structures, his voice barely audible above the roar of the river.

"When you get to the top of this path head off to your right," he told them, "About a quarter of a mile up that way you'll find a trail leading to a cave in the rocks. Stay up there until morning. You can see the cabin from the boulder above the cave entrance. When you see me come out and head down here you can go in and get him. He'll be so doped up he won't even know you're there. You got it?"

"Yes, of course," Albert growled. "I'll send Cheney and Collins around the far side; Carl and I will come in from the front. Are there any weapons in the cabin?"

"No. Well, none that will fire. He'll be unconscious, anyway, so you won't have to worry.

"I'll make that decision, if you don't mind," Albert bristled. "I'm not going to take a chance on any of my people getting killed. I know how dangerous this man is."

They talked more, turning to survey the river and inspect the path, while Albert summarized the terrain layout and deployment tactics. It was clear they intended to enter the cabin shooting, if necessary.

When everyone understood what they were supposed to do, Max admonished them to give him plenty of time to reach the cabin before they began their ascent to the cave. Thirty minutes, he told them, ought to do the trick. He turned to leave and moments later we could hear his footsteps as he slogged up the steep steps. The other men milled around until they found rocks to sit on, glancing at their watches and massaging their feet and legs.

Moon squirmed over beside me and grinned. "Ask me how I know your name," he said.

"How do you know my name?" I asked.

"Funny you should ask. I like to know who's riding behind me when I get out here in the boonies. I suppose I should introduce myself." He produced identification. David Moon. United States Trea-

sury Department.

"What're you doing here?" I asked.

"You know damned well why I'm here. These people have taken some money that isn't theirs and we want it back. I know why those guys are here, but I haven't figured out what you're up to."

Still watching the agents below, I told him as much about Calhoun as I thought he should know, omitting the part about the one hundred million dollars he'd pinched from Colonel Fourney's bunker during the operation in Washington State, his defection from the agency and his alter ego.

Talk like that makes people vanish like snowflakes in July.

He chewed some dry skin from his thumb. "Well, if I were you, I would find a safe way off this mountain and leave. Those people are here to make life miserable for someone."

"I reckon so. Look, I have to get back right away; my wife went up to that cave they were talking about and I don't want her to be wandering around there when those four get there." I made a move to slip away, but he held my arm.

"Don't worry about it, Constable. I met her near the cave entrance and sent her back to wait at the cabin. She said something about Calhoun being sick; what's that all about?"

I told him about Calhoun's medicine and how it affected him. He considered it briefly, waved it away and asked if I knew anything about Max Hanks.

"Calhoun says he's his wife's uncle. I'm not sure I believe that, but there it is. Hanks doesn't talk much and Calhoun's been too busy talking about himself. I don't know anything else about him."

"What's your plan for Calhoun?"

I scratched my chin and slid back against the boulder so I could sit up and stretch the cramps out of my legs, thinking Max Hanks was a perfect candidate for any number of the agency's dirty tricks.

"I don't know now," I said. "I feel like I should get up there and warn him before it's too late."

"Do you owe him that? Sounds to me like he's a bad egg, too, and if he's stolen any of that money, someone's going to have to take him in as well."

I pondered, worrying the thoughts around in my head as I tried to decide whether or not I owed Calhoun the warning. In the end, I figured I didn't, but it probably wouldn't stop me from warning him anyhow. I told Moon how I felt and asked him if he knew who the four agents were.

"Well, I didn't when they contracted to come up the river but I found out soon enough. The Markham Institute they talk about doesn't exist. Well it does, but it's a fictitious front for the department of Intelligence and Counter Espionage. Wait, let me finish!

"After the rain caught us at the river and you disappeared, I led them to shelter down stream and left them there, headed back toward the bridge until I could get back up to the trail.

"They showed up at the flats below the rest camp the next afternoon and I followed them to see what they were up to. I knew something was up because they'd left their little bottles and nets

somewhere and they were toting all that heavy artillery. I stayed out of sight, just keeping up with them until about two hours ago. When they got this close, I knew where they were heading. Now I know why. As clumsy as those guys are Calhoun will have to be unconscious and tied to a post if they want to get close enough to surprise him."

"How did you get here without them seeing you?" I asked.

"I came across the top of the ridge, up there behind the clearing, and walked down the side of the mountain right smack into your wife about twenty feet from the mouth of the cave. I'm not sure, man, but I think she peed her pants when she came around that rock and saw me standing there. You'll tell her I'm sorry I scared her, won't you?"

I nodded, slinging the carbine and bandolier. I figured I had about two hundred rounds of ammunition counting the thirty rounds in the clip. It would be like carrying a kid back up the mountain. Still I was glad to have it and I let Moon know it, then asked him what was in the cave.

"Nothing now," he said, "but that boat was in there up until a couple of hours ago. The cradle was laying in the bushes outside and I could see where a bunch of cartons had been stored along the walls. Looks like they're getting to make a run for it, doesn't it?"

I agreed it did, adding that I was eager to get back to the cabin so I could warn Calhoun.

"Well, your people have dibs on Calhoun, if they can get close to him, but I'll be spending most of my time watching those four until they lead me to the money. You'd better be getting back. I left a canvas gunsafe and a ground cover up there at the right side of the trail by a fallen cedar. I'd hide the carbine there if I were you."

"Makes sense to me. Look, thanks again; I owe you one. Are you going to be around where I can see you once in a while?"

"I'll be around, but you won't see me. If anyone tries to leave with the money, though, you'll be on your own. Considering what those four men have in mind, I don't think I'd want to be within shooting distance if they make it to the front door. I have a feeling they'll shoot anything with less than four legs. Maybe some of them, too. Don't let coyote eat you."

Don't let coyote eat you was David Moon's way of telling me to watch my six; to not be caught unawares and be killed.

"Ummm," I said. "You too."

He rose, stretched for the ledge above and pulled himself up and out of sight. I listened carefully for two or three minutes but never did hear him creep away.

The agents were due to begin their climb in ten minutes and I figured Hanks had already made it to the top, so I eased over to the path and headed up, staying in the grass and leaves at the edges of the steps to minimize my footprints.

I was huffing like a train by the time I reached the clearing, found the toppled cedar, hid the carbine, and strolled back toward the cabin where Brandy, Calhoun and Max were leaning on the corral fence looking at the horses.

Brandy pulled out and met me halfway. "I told them you went up to the rocks

but I couldn't make it so I came back by myself. I'm not sure but I think they know you went out to snoop around."

I let her know I could handle that lie easily since I was still out of breath from climbing the hill and I'd come out of the forest right where I should have if I'd done up to the cave. We joined Calhoun and Hanks and I told them the same story as I braced against the railing to keep from dropping dead. My legs felt like rubber and my sides were aching from gasping for air as I labored up the path.

"You're right, Calhoun," I huffed, "that's a hell of a climb up there. Nice view, though. I could see the whole property. Can I go in and sit down now?"

They looked a little skeptical but I think they bought the story. Calhoun nodded and waved his stick toward the cabin; the signal, I suppose, that we could go fall down on a rug or something. Brandy and I turned to go, but Hanks held Calhoun's arm, turning him away for a brief conversation as they ambled toward the far end of the corral.

I looked back as we reached the door, saw Calhoun walking slowly down the trail behind us and Max headed for the outhouse. I figured he was going up to the cave to verify my story. That suited me just fine; it would give me a chance to drag Calhoun aside to warn him about the ambush.

I pumped up a glass of water from the kitchen cistern and waited until Calhoun had pulled off his coat and hooked it over the peg by the fireplace, then I motioned him over to the table. He sat heavily, pushing his left leg out in front of him cautiously as though it might break. When he was settled, he thumped an elbow down on the table and rested his chin in the palm of his hand, staring at me with mild interest.

He sighed once and pursed his lips, waving Brandy over to join us as he pushed a chair out with his good foot. She sat and he laid the walking stick on the table casually, almost carelessly.

"What is it, Richard?" he asked.

"The four guys with the hardware are here. I saw Max talking to them down at the river."

Nothing. Not even a blink of an eye, not even a quickening of the breath. Not a twitch. Not a shiver.

"That doesn't bother you?" I asked.

"No," he answered.

"He told them how to get up here, told them he'd have you doped up so they could come right in and get you, kill you if necessary."

The words tumbled out then as I explained how I had followed Max and waited on the rock until the four men had arrived. I repeated the conversation as near as I could remember, stressing the deployment of the two men around the back way and the two from the front, letting him know that Tom Cheney would be coming from the rear. I told him Max was planning on drugging him so he would be unable to defend himself or run as the agents approached, told him everything except my meeting with David Moon, then sat back to wait for his response.

It was everything but what I had expected.

"I hoped it wouldn't come to this, Richard. I thought you would take Brandy and return to your camp before Harper showed up so you wouldn't be involved.

Now I'm not certain what I should do."

"But Max," I protested.

"Shut up! Max Hanks has been assigned to look after me, to keep an eye on me. Besides, he wouldn't dream of exposing me."

"I think you underestimate him, Dallas; he seemed to know exact...."

"Quiet!" He growled, fixing me with a somber stare. "You have an unusual sense of deduction, Richard; I always liked that about you. Not that it changes anything, you understand. I'm surprised you haven't figured this out yet. Maybe you have and you aren't telling me; not that it matters. Unfortunately, you have a gullible nature, too, which I find disgustingly exploitable. It is a flaw in your personality that allows people to manipulate you at will. They ask for help and you want to run away; they offer a scrap of fear and you'll do anything they say, including wasting your lives looking for people like me.

"But no one is going to storm in here and kill me, Richard. You think Max is down there setting me up? No, it's you they will find unconscious in the bed when they arrive. And while they're trussing you up for a trip back to Washington, I'll be on my way to Lolo."

He looked at Brandy, back to me, and his thumb quivered for an instant while he decided his next move. At length he pulled a .380 Browning pistol from his pocket and pointed it at me.

"You may move, Brandy," he said. "But if you try to run or try to do anything stupid, Richard will be dead. Nothing you can do will prevent it. Sit down over there." He pointed to the chair by the front window.

She crept to the chair and sat, folding her hands in her lap and began digging at her nails nervously.

"So, Richard," Calhoun said after he was certain she wouldn't move, "Have you figured it out yet? Come on, show me what you're made of, convince me I've been wrong about you. Tell me you've guessed why you're here."

He tapped the table with the stick, urging me to say something, but I couldn't. He was apparently right; I was a fool and I'd let the agency manipulate me into chasing him to the mountain for some reason I couldn't even begin to imagine. I fought back a wave of vertigo, thinking Calhoun might kill us both in a few hours, aware that I was nearly powerless to prevent him from doing so.

He tapped the table again. "Anything, Richard? Anything in there at all?"

I dropped my gaze and shook my head shamefully, sagging back against the chair, defeated and humiliated, glanced at Brandy who was looking at the floor.

"No," I said, my voice strained and rasping. "I don't know what they're trying to do."

He cleared his throat and groaned slightly as he shifted in the chair. "Then let me tell you. You learned something in Vietnam twenty odd years ago that will lead these people to something they need that has been hidden in these mountains. That much I know. I don't know what it is or where it is. I don't even care. But they want you so they can convince you to reveal the location. They will use whatever means they feel necessary to get

that information, even if it eventually kills you."

"But I don't know... ."

"You know, Richard. Someone locked it inside your head before you got to our Station in Washington, D.C. Halsey tried for two months to get it out of you and failed. You are here because they believe the environment, the danger or their drugs will make you remember.

"But I am not going to stick around to find out what they want. Max and I are leaving for Lolo because that's where they will take you if you survive. I'm sorry to say that whether you live or die isn't terribly important right now. We want Capricorn's army and the rest of that money. Arresting you two will confuse them long enough for us to get into position."

"They're back in business? Why didn't you just tell me that? Why all this nonsense about your defection and the theft of the money? If you had explained it the first day, I'd have gone back down the hill and got out of your life."

"I thought about it," he said grimly, glancing quickly toward Brandy. "But how do I know you aren't really here to kill me? How do I know you weren't hired by Capricorn to discover what I'm doing here?"

I watched him carefully, knowing he could make my world come to a screeching halt before I could even jump. But it almost didn't make any difference; if he didn't kill me tonight, the others would do it tomorrow. Or the United States government would do it for him while he and Max Hanks made a run for the falls in a sturdy wooden boat filled with as much money as they thought it would hold.

"But why sacrifice us so you can escape? Why couldn't you simply let us go and vanish again?"

His eyebrows went up a fraction of an inch, as though the question were too illogical to answer.

"I might if I thought you'd keep your nose out of this but I know you won't. And the agency is afraid you'll talk to the wrong people someday so they want you in a pine box. I have to finish this so I can have some peace in my life. So I can go to places where no one knows who I am or what I've done; where I will be a new man, separate and apart from all that haunted Dallas Calhoun. We—the agency and I—can't leave witnesses. I'm sorry but that's the way it is."

"A born again assassin."

Calhoun laughed again, an evil laugh this time, and relaxed, closing his eyes and taking a breath as he leaned away about an inch.

I lunged sideways, caught the edge of the table with my fingertips and pulled upward, tossing it over on top of him, spilling him to the floor in a tangle of scattered furniture. He tried to pull away, swinging the stick toward me as the table crushed him, but I fell on top of him, brought my elbow up under his chin, cracking his teeth as I twisted the stick away from his fumbling fingers.

He gagged as I drove my forearm into his throat and forced the table down onto his chest. He choked, coughing blood and sputum across my face.

He kicked and thrashed, quivering spasms, as I pushed his head back with my arm, trying to strangle him, hitting him again and again, screaming and

cursing until Max Hanks burst into the cabin, threw himself onto me, knocking me to the floor.

Max dragged me away, still kicking at Calhoun's face, still cursing, to the corner where he hit me once; a numbing blow that stunned me witless.

TEN

I lay there looking at the frayed edges of the musty rug, wondering how many years it had taken to get that way while Brandy floated into view and drifted away, circling me like a landing craft waiting to drop a load of troops on the beach, screaming and struggling while Max loaded the syringe and pumped my arm full of Calhoun's potent narcotic.

Everything inside my head went into low gear. My heart was going one beat a week and I kept forgetting how to breathe. My limbs would not respond to any commands and I imagined for what seemed hours that I was sinking into the floor, through the timbers and into the crawl space beneath the cabin, hovering in the smelly darkness just above the damp earth.

I didn't care, couldn't muster up the energy to figure out what the hell was going on as I frowned at the rug and at Brandy's feet appearing and disappearing, pacing and pausing. She seemed frantic; I couldn't imagine what was so important.

She tried to lift me several times, tried to drag me to the door, first by my shoulders, then by my heels. She tried rolling me, pushing me, prying me but I was glued to the deck; a permanent part of the cabin. I wasn't going anywhere unless she could find a crane.

Cold air flowed across the floor, wafted me as a pair of heavy boots thumped my way, stopped inches from my nose, and voices boomed in slow motion like someone had their hand on the record. Max Hanks kicked me over on my back, standing over me like a towering David, looking from me to Calhoun and back again. I could see Brandy cowering against the kitchen cabinets, all distorted and wavering like a gossamer curtain caught in a summer wind. She was speaking to Hanks but I couldn't understand the words. I had eyes but could not see, ears but could not hear.

Presently Hanks stooped and lifted me as easily as he would have picked up a child, slung me across his shoulders and, in half a dozen great strides, tossed me like a sack of meal onto Calhoun's unmade bed. A moment later he flung Brandy into the room, waved his arms and shouted, storming back and forth for a few minutes, then slammed and locked the door.

*****

I opened my eyes to find Brandy staring at me intently. I was covered with sweat, still in my clothes, groggy and disoriented and smelling like a goat. I pulled a trembling hand down across my face, and reached out for her.

"Oh, God," I moaned, "I feel like hell. Where are we?"

"Same place," she said, "The cabin on the mountain. You were dreaming."

"Was I? I don't remember. Was I talking?"

"Nothing I could make out. Something about a house in Fort Wayne, Indi-

ana."

I nodded weakly, the images returning, and told her about the dream.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's five o'clock in the morning. Do you feel like you can get up? We should try to get out of here before those four agents come."

I tried to work some saliva into my dry mouth and rubbed my head gingerly.

"My hair hurts," I groaned. "What the unholy hell happened to me?"

"You don't remember?"

I shook my head and closed my eyes again, snuggled down into the covers and tried to go back to sleep.

"You don't remember what happened last night?" she asked again, shaking me out of my stupor.

"I don't remember, no."

She told me and I wished she hadn't. It came back as I listened to her words, knew it wasn't a nightmare, something horrible I'd conjured up in a fever while I slept. Calhoun was dead, she said, and I'd killed him, bashed him to death, broken his bones and crushed him under the table. His dried blood was still on my clothing. The four agents were due to arrive at any moment to cut us apart with their weapons and I couldn't muster up the energy to get out of bed, couldn't get my thoughts together long enough to formulate a plan for our escape.

I eased into a sitting position on the edge of the bed with my head down, almost against my knees, fighting off the nausea, struggled for air, and held out my hands to Brandy for support.

"Help me up," I said, "and maybe we can think of a way to get out of here. Did I ask you what time it is?"

"Yes. It's five o'clock in the morning."

She pulled me to my feet and I sagged against her, reeling like a drunk, groaning from the pain in my head, thinking I was beginning to sound like Calhoun, asking questions and not remembering the answers. I reached for the door knob and pulled, nearly fell on my face when the door didn't swing open as it should have. I looked at Brandy with my eyebrows up.

"We're locked in, Richard. Max threw us in here and locked the door last night. Don't you remember?"

She went over it again, patting my face and squeezing my cheeks every time I drifted away or looked like I was going to fall back onto the bed. When she was finished, she looked at me seriously and asked if I understood. I nodded and asked her if she had looked for a way out. She had.

The window was barred and bolted shut with one of the heavy wooden doors, secured with a padlock. The door, locked from the outside, would yield to nothing less than a battering ram. The foot-thick walls of logs and concrete seemed impregnable. There were no loose boards in the thick flooring which we could pry away to expose the crawl space beneath the cabin. I studied the open-beamed ceiling, squinting in the dim light, hoping to find an area we could tear apart so we could escape onto the roof. Reeling dizzily, I pushed a dresser to the rear corner and, with Brandy's help, climbed onto it and examined the boards and shingles. If there was any weakness in the construction of the cabin, it would be there, near the eaves, where the narrow pine boards

were exposed to the weather at the top plate.

I pushed upward and the boards and shingles groaned, cracking at the edges as the nails pulled away. It would take awhile and I'd make a lot of noise, but I felt certain I could force a hole through the roofing large enough for us to get out.

"Is Max still in the cabin?" I asked, peering at the dim light under the shingles I had pried away.

"I think I heard him leave just before you woke up, but I'm not sure. I heard some noise outside near the storage building for awhile like he was moving things or piling boxes," she answered.

"No sounds inside?"

"Not for awhile."

"Well, he's probably given them the signal to move then, so we don't have much time. You listen at the door and I'll try to tear out this corner." I pulled a shelf from the wall and began prying at the boards again, using the shelf as a lever until I had managed to make a hole large enough to get my head through. I surveyed everything I could see quickly, determined that no one was around the building, then began tearing away the remaining boards until I was satisfied we could climb out onto the roof.

I helped Brandy up, climbed out behind her, and lay quietly for a moment, listening to the sounds of the waking forest. Signalling for Brandy to stay put, I crawled to the peak of the roof and looked out across the meadow toward the river, but I could detect no sounds or signs of movement that revealed any activity by the four agents or Max Hanks. Except for the wind sighing in the cedars and the ever present roar of the Selway, the forest was ominously silent, a sure sign something was moving out there.

Hanks was gone, had probably reached the boat tied at the river, and the four agents, if they had seen Max's signal, would be getting into position to storm the cabin. We wouldn't have a lot of time to get off the roof and get away before they would be on us, and it would take a lot of walking to get around to the trail where I'd hidden the carbine.

I slid down the roof, held Brandy's arm while she dropped over the edge to the ground, then climbed down to join her. My arms and legs ached from the effort and we leaned against the cabin for awhile until I cleared the fog from my head. At length I took her hand and led her away, angling up into the trees and staying low until we reached the cover of ferns and alder saplings at the edge of the clearing. We sat down on the damp ground, shivering from the cold and puffing steam into the morning air while we scanned the area trying to spot any movement along the trails leading to the cabin.

"We'll stay here awhile," I whispered, "and see if anyone shows up. If they follow instructions, two of them should be coming out of the trees over there behind the corral." I pointed to the area some fifty yards away.

"I wonder what Max did with Calhoun," Brandy said presently.

"What?"

"I wonder what Max did with Calhoun; with his body."

I shrugged, preferring to forget the episode, pulled my collar up against the cold and settled back against a tree to

wait. Brandy snuggled down beside me, worming her way under my arm and hugging me for warmth. I thought about Max Hanks, wondering what he had loaded from the storage building and wondering if the cartons taken from the cave had contained the money Calhoun had stolen from Colonel Fourney's bunker. If David Moon was keeping a close watch on Max's activities, he wouldn't get far and may already have been arrested. With Hanks to contend with, I knew Moon would be busy and I couldn't expect much help from him when the four DICE agents arrived at the cabin.

They wouldn't spend a lot of time investigating the cabin, either, and when they found the hole in the roof they'd be after us, fanning out in all directions until they ran us down. But I didn't want to start moving until I knew where they were, knew which direction they were heading, and knew what they planned to do after they discovered us gone.

Motioning for Brandy to lie flat, I eased away from the tree and crouched in the brush a few yards away, scanning the area before me until I spotted Tom Cheney making his way through the trees to get behind the cabin. He held a KG99 automatic pistol in one hand, using it to push the brush away as he made his way stealthily toward us. He passed us, stopped at the edge of the clearing, and pulled a hand-held radio from his belt, telling someone he was in position. The answer, clearly audible even from sixty feet away, informed him they were ready to make the assault on the cabin. A moment later, Cheney trotted away toward the rear of the building.

I went back to Brandy, told her to watch the left side of the clearing while I watched the right, noting where each of the agents emerged and the directions they went. When we were satisfied that all four had made their way to the cabin, I took her hand and led her around the clearing to where I'd left the carbine. I dug it from under the leaves, slung the bandolier over my shoulder, chambered a round, released the safety, and went back to the trail leading over the ridge toward the shack where I'd spent my second night.

I pulled Brandy into a small opening in some rocks and let her sit on my lap.

"Look," I said presently. "Everybody out there thinks we're trying to get our hands on that goddamned money they've pigeonholed for their covert operations. They can't allow that, even if it isn't true. They want us dead or in custody. It doesn't matter if they have to sacrifice three or four men to get the job done, either.

"I think the man who was supposed to recover the money for DICE has it now and he's on his way down the river with it. Someone may be waiting to help him download the boat and get the money into a secret bank account where it will be impossible to find."

She put her head against my chest and wriggled her hands inside my jacket to warm her fingers, breathing softly and regularly.

"I'm really tired, Richard," she said wearily. "I was awake all night watching you because I was afraid you'd die. Can I sleep for a while?"

I didn't want to tarry too long so close to the cabin because I knew the four agents would be looking for us, but I

agreed to let her rest for a few minutes. It's difficult enough to stay alert and alive in a hostile forest when a person is rested and well fed, but it's nearly impossible when all you can think about is finding a few bird eggs or a handful of berries to eat, or a safe place to hide while you get some sleep.

Trying to elude armed men while you're exhausted is stupid. You begin to plod, to plow paths through the forest, through the jungle, that a blind man could follow. You begin to believe that your enemy might be kind and understanding, that he will tend to your wounds and clothe you and feed you three meals a day, that he will look the other way while you dig a tunnel under the fence to freedom.

Not so. If they don't kill you immediately, they drag you to a cage, beaten and naked, to interrogate you unceasingly for days, weeks, months, denying you food and rest so you cannot think of escaping. They get all the information they can, by any means required and regardless of the time involved.

Then they kill you.

I had no reason to hope that the agency would be less cruel just because we were fellow countrymen. It wouldn't matter to them that I might have been a comrade, might have worked beside many of them on an operation. If they had a notion we ought to die because we were jeopardizing their counter operation, we were as good as dead.

I shook the maudlin thoughts from my mind, squirmed down against the rock so Brandy would be comfortable and tried to put the events of the past two days into some kind of order. Maybe Calhoun really was looney. Maybe he had been given the task of protecting the agency's money but lost control somehow. Maybe the agency knew where he was all along and were protecting him, saving him for some future operation.

But if his injury was so disabling that he could no longer function to the agency's satisfaction, they would certainly be motivated to terminate him simply because they didn't need to baby-sit him for the rest of his life. If the money was controlled by the agency from the beginning, why give us eighty thousand and the letter, then send us off to find Calhoun? Why not cut off his supply of narcotics and let him die? Or let Tom Cheney junior put a bullet in his brain and be done with it?

I stumbled over the details for half an hour, trying to piece it together but the puzzle yielded no clear image. Too many events overlapped. One solution only led to another dilemma. The answer to one question only confused the solution I had constructed for another and, by the time I felt I should wake Brandy, I was no nearer solving the problems about the money than I had been six months earlier during Operation Capricorn. The money was the key, but not the answer. Money is just paper. This money, in particular, was nearly worthless since it had been slated to be burned during the invasion of South Vietnam and the fall of Saigon.

I shook Brandy awake, holding one hand over her mouth in case she cried out, and she stirred sleepily, stared up at me wearily.

"Time to go," I said simply.

We got back on the trail and made our

way carefully along the river, I leading and Brandy following, rubbing her arms against the cold and grumbling dismally about what a fool she was to be wandering around in a damp forest pursued by armed madmen when she could be curled up beside a warm fire reading Richard Bach with a steaming cup of black tea.

You see? Warmth and comfort and a bellyful of food; that's what escapees think about. That's what makes them get careless and want to turn themselves in to their captors again. I knew I'd have to cheer her on, pump her up until we were safe so she wouldn't be tempted to give us away.

"If they've planned all this so well," she said at length, "what makes you think they haven't guessed that you'll head right for those horses? And what makes you think the horses are still there? If Moon was in on this from the beginning he may have lied to you about following the others here. Maybe they came together. Maybe you'll find Moon's horse tied there with the others; maybe they'll all be gone. What then?"

I had to admit I hadn't thought about it, and admonished her to be as quiet as possible so we couldn't be heard if someone was trailing us from behind or above.

"Believe me, Brandy, when I tell you that David Moon could have killed everyone on this side of the mountain four days ago and none of us would ever have seen him. He has no intention of killing us."

We arrived quite unexpectedly at the small clearing near the river's edge where the horses had been tethered the previous day. I'd been listening for sounds of the animals grazing or pulling restlessly at their reins, expecting to find them tied in a neat row, I guess, waiting for us to mount up and ride off into the trees. What we found was nothing like the picture I had conjured up inside my head. The boat was pulled up on the bank but the bottom had been caved in with a large rock. The horses were gone, but the four saddles and sixteen empty wooden crates scattered about the clearing indicated someone had loaded the bags of money on the mounts brought by the agents.

I was tempted to follow the trail made by the horses because it was over ground that was reasonably easy to walk, but the idea that we might be moving into a trap nagged at me, and I pointed up the hill toward the crest some four hundred feet above.

"Oh, God, Richard, I'm already exhausted," Brandy complained indignantly. "Why can't we just go on along the river where the path isn't so steep?"

"We're going up, Brandy," I answered firmly. "Whoever has that money isn't going to let anyone out of here to follow him. He'll wait down there for a while now and see who shows up. Then he'll kill them."

With my head down and knees slightly bent, I plodded stoically up the incline with Brandy clutching my belt, no longer aware of the beauty around us, intent only on placing one foot in front of the other, pushing and pulling, clinging to branches and saplings, struggling and puffing with the bandolier swinging against my chest at every step, until we crawled the last few yards to the ridge.

Brandy lay in the duff gasping for air while I sagged against a cedar and

looked back the way we had come, dismayed to discover we had climbed for an hour without leaving the scene of the camp behind us. I could still see the small clearing in the alders where the horses had trampled the vegetation, the scattered boxes and the ruined boat pulled awkwardly onto the rocky shore.

The mountains, when seen from a distance, appeared to rise in gentle, rolling undulations, with visible trails and easy access to the summit, but only when we began the climb had they assumed a truer dimension of depth and height and roughness. It had been a simple thing to trace the route on the USGS maps. The entire journey from Boyd's Creek to Calhoun's cabin covered less than eight inches, but the charts, with their two dimensional aspects of the terrain and lack of a tangible third dimension of the heights, had deceived me into believing the climb would be easy.

The trail at the clearing had been fairly level and easy to follow, the air cool and heavy with the fragrance of wildflowers and pungent soil, the sounds of the rushing river inviting and soothing. But now, on the summit, weary and disheartened, perched precariously between the boulders and cedars, there was only the rough, cutting stones, the cold, thin air, annoying insects, and the odor of our sweat-soaked clothing.

I closed my eyes and rubbed the backs of my legs, leaning against a cedar for support, and thought of removing my boots to inspect the blisters on my heels. Brandy lay on the cold ground, curled as she had fallen, gasping for air with her eyes closed, moaning and rubbing her legs and ankles. I watched her for long moments, angry with myself for having brought her into this disastrous misadventure, vowing to get us out safely, never to return.

We rested for ten minutes, then agonized to our feet and began making our way along the ridge toward the leaky shack. I reckoned it was no more than two miles away. It had taken me two hours to cover the distance on horseback; it would take twice that long to walk. The trees were thin and the underbrush sparse on the ridge and, despite our weariness, we were making good time, passing through bare clearings and low grass when a helicopter swept up from the river and passed directly overhead, headed in the general direction of Calhoun's cabin.

I grabbed Brandy by the collar and literally threw her to the ground, dove into the grass beside her and began looking for the nearest stand of cedars.

"If they come back they'll spot us for sure," I said. "When I say go, you run for those trees. I'll be right behind you so don't stop or slow down. Got it?"

"You hurt my arm, Richard," she growled. "Do you have to be so rough?"

"No. I'm sorry. It was just a reaction, Can you make it to those trees?"

"Yes."

"Get going."

We were not a graceful pair, encumbered as we were with our heavy clothing and the rifle and bandolier, and we cut a ragged path through the grass, but we made it into the trees after the chopper sailed out of sight beyond the next ridge, collapsed against the trees again and tried to catch our breath.

I renewed my vow right then and

there that if we ever got out of that forest alive, we were finished working for or running from the agency. But the only reason I could make such a vow was because I didn't realize then how difficult it was going to be to make it come true. It might have been easier for me to say I was going to flap my arms so vigorously that I would fly right off that mountain with Brandy riding on my back.

"Do you suppose that's the people from the Boise station?" Brandy asked after she was breathing again.

"Maybe, but they aren't here to help us. I imagine Albert got on his little radio and called for help. Now we have to stay away from that bunch as well and that won't be easy to do if they start searching for us with the chopper. He'll tell them about the motor home, too, and they'll be watching it, so we can't go back there."

"We can't go on and we can't stay here," she growled with exasperation, shivering against the cold dampness. "Someone is waiting just ahead, and the agents from DICE will be waiting at the motor home. What do you purpose we do?"

"I don't know, yet; I'll have to think about it."

"Well, I have an idea."

"What? "

She puffed, looking back the way we came, and framed a response. "We're closer to Calhoun's cabin than we are to Boyd's Creek. Will anyone stay at Calhoun's cabin to see if we come back? I mean, if they're picked up by the helicopter and go back to Boyd's Creek to wait for us, why couldn't we go back to the cabin and get our horses and some food? I'd rather try that. The trail through the meadow to the rest camp is better than this one and I think we could make better time on horseback."

"It would take us a couple of hours to get back if we stayed up here on the ridge," I replied, looking at my watch. "It would be late in the afternoon and we would still have to come all the way back. They might leave someone at the cabin, too, just in case we return."

"Let's try it anyhow."

"There might be shooting."

She frowned at me petulantly, her green eyes boring into mine.

"Okay," I said, comparing the distance back to the cabin against the father distance to Boyd's Creek, knowing her plan was more plausible than any I could dredge up. "We'll go back and get the horses."

"And some food," she reminded.

"Yes, and some food," I agreed.

"Dry clothes," she suggested.

"You're pushing it," I chided.

"You saddle the horses and I'll get the food and dry clothes," she insisted, "and a quick bath for both of us."

ELEVEN

Hours later, near the cave overlooking the cabin, cut, bruised and exhausted to stupefaction, we stopped in the shelter of the overhanging trees to survey the scene below.

The property appeared deserted, the helicopter gone, no signs of activity anywhere. No smoke issued from the chimney and, as far as we could see from our vantage point, the cabin had been locked

and secured for the duration.

The three horses, ours and Max's, stood motionless at the corral fence, and the door to the outhouse was ajar. The waning sun cast long, dark shadows across the meadow, the wind sighed in the cedars, birds flitted from tree to tree, calling and complaining, and the ever-present roar of the Selway echoed up from the canyon.

It was a deceptively peaceful scene. The cabin with its promise of warming comfort, stores of food and clean clothing begged us to come and make ourselves at home.

"It looks deserted," Brandy offered presently.

"It looks that way," I nodded, "but we'll wait for awhile and see if anyone moves.

"I think they're gone."

"Maybe, but it won't hurt to wait, rest for a few minutes, and see if they left anyone behind. We didn't hear or see the helicopter leave, you know, and we don't know how many people came in. If there were three or four people in the helicopter, they'd have a tough time loading in four more with all their weapons and other gear. And the horses are still in the corral, so none of them rode out. We'll wait."

Brandy sighed with exasperation, squirmed into a cut between the rocks and hugged herself into a nodding sleep while I sat back against a tree stump and watched the area below, forcing myself to stay awake and alert for any sight or sound of human activity.

I wondered what Max had done with Calhoun's body after he locked us in the bedroom the previous day. There weren't many places he could have hidden the body around the cabin, but he may have dragged Calhoun into the forest somewhere if he thought he could have done it without being seen by the agents waiting at the cave.

It hardly seemed possible. I could see the entire property from the promontory and knew Max would have been unable to move Calhoun anywhere without being seen unless he had waited until it was dark. Even then it might have been difficult for there was no concealing brush within fifty feet of the cabin or surrounding buildings. If the agent on watch had been alert, he should have been able to see or hear Max moving around down there.

But maybe not. Max had given me the impression he could hold his own in the forest and was a tough, old bird with a lot of savvy. I figured Max wouldn't have left Calhoun's body in the cabin for the agents to discover because that might have fouled up the plans. So he had to hide Calhoun's body. But if he didn't take the body from the cabin, what had he done with it? I knew the agents would have swept every inch of the cabin and surrounding area before they departed. Would they not realize the boat and several heavy cartons had been stored in the cave until just before they arrived? If they had, and if they were really after the money, would they not have tried to find out where it had been moved?

David Moon knew the boat had been in the cave; he told me so. I could see the cradle still laying in the brush below the entrance. But had he known what was in the cartons or had he only guessed? And

if he had known, why did he not arrest Max on the spot? Why did be want to wait until Max had loaded the boat and was preparing to shove off for the falls? It would have been a lot easier and safer to move the money over the trails on horseback rather than risk losing it in the rapids.

Brandy had slept for nearly an hour when I woke her with a gentle kiss, brushing her disheveled hair away from her face.

"Time to wake up, peach," I said.

She started, alert and fearful, glancing around into the trees for signs of approaching men.

"What is it? Is someone coming?"

"No," I replied, helping her to her feet. "It's been an hour and no one has moved down there. I think it's safe to go. Feel up to it?"

"Sure," she said, struggling to her feet. "I can hardly wait to get into some clean, dry clothes and have something to eat."

"I think Max was really taking care of Calhoun and keeping an eye on everyone who came up here looking for him, making certain no one got too close to the money," I said as we made our way down the soggy trail. "Calhoun would never have told us what he was doing up here unless he wanted us to know or unless he wanted us to get the information back to the agency."

"Or to Allison Haniford," Brandy said. "But Calhoun wasn't the same person we knew before, Richard. He'd changed; you know that. He was crazy. Crazier."

"Was he? Or was he only pretending to be batty to keep us busy staying out of his way? He didn't sound any more insane than the rest of his pals when he talked to us last night. By the way, did Max leave the cabin any time between locking us in the bedroom and morning?"

She cocked her head and thought for a moment. "I don't think so. No, he didn't."

"Could you hear anything from behind the door?"

"Sure. He went to the kitchen and it sounded as if he were cleaning up the blood on the floor. He ran a lot of water and I could hear him crawling around, like he was on his hands and knees scrubbing up the mess."

"Made a lot of noise."

"Lots of noise."

"So much that Calhoun could have slipped out the door without you knowing it?"

"Well, maybe," she puzzled, "but Calhoun was dead, wasn't he?"

"Did it sound like he moved Calhoun's body?"

"He carried something heavy into the other bedroom," she grimaced.

"Not outside?"

"No, not outside. He didn't leave, as far as I could tell until morning just before I woke you up."

I chewed some torn skin from the end of my thumb and stared into the heavy shadows trying to imagine what Max would have done in those hours of darkness.

"Why?" she asked.

"Are you sure Calhoun was dead, that I really killed him?"

"Well, yeah, that's what Max was yell-

ing about, that's why he was so angry. He seemed not to know what to do with Calhoun dead. He was very confused, even frightened. He ranted for hours, cleaning the floor and going to the bedroom, pacing the floor and coming to our door to listen just outside. I was pretty scared myself. I thought he might kill us both. But why do you ask?"

"Calhoun was dead?" I asked again.

"Dead. I'm just certain he was. Well, I think so."

I shook my head, shouldering the carbine and bandolier. "Something is very screwy here, Peach. He had to hide Calhoun's body, don't you see? Unless the agency already knew it, he couldn't let anyone know Dallas was alive all these months; there would have been no way to explain it. I want to know where he put the body."

We took the trail leading down from the cave, turned right at the bottom of the incline, and began making our way around the compound to the area behind the outhouse. We stayed in the shadows of the trees, picking our way carefully through the brush on the same faint trail Calhoun and I had taken previously.

"Maybe Max didn't have to hide the body, Richard," Brandy offered presently. "Maybe the agency already knew he wasn't dead, like you said. Maybe he was just out here holding their money until they needed it. Max wouldn't have to hide the body then, would he?"

"No, but why was he trying to clean up the blood, trying to hide the evidence of Calhoun's death if it didn't matter?" I shook my head wearily. "No, love, Calhoun was supposed to be dead, everyone was supposed to believe that."

"Why?"

"I don't know; I really don't."

We arrived at the outhouse without incident, crouching in the brush and listening for any sounds from the cabin that would betray the presence of an agent waiting to pick us off. I could hear nothing after waiting another fifteen minutes so I motioned for Brandy to stay behind me, admonishing her to be ready to dive off the trail if someone appeared at the windows, and we made our way cautiously to the back door.

I tried the knob quietly, found it locked, and went all the way around the cabin without finding a way in, arriving at the rear corner where we had escaped over the roof. Patches of shingles and broken boards hung from the eaves, indicating that they had not sealed the hole.

"Looks like the only way back in," I said dejectedly.

"I hope someone isn't inside waiting for us to fall through the hole."

"Umm, hmm. Want to stay here while I take a look?"

"I'll be at the back door."

"Right. If I don't open it or come back out in thirty seconds, get the hell out of here. Understand?"

She nodded and crept to the rear door to wait while I pulled myself onto the roof, clawing and scrabbling at the broken boards sliding into my face. Once on top, I peered into the darkness, unable to make out any dangerous shapes in the room. At length, I lowered myself onto the dresser below and hopped to the floor. The room was quite and dark, the door closed, but not locked.

I opened it slowly, mashed against

the wall in case someone fired a shot, and peered into the empty kitchen. A number of automatic weapons were stacked on the living room floor. I went to the back door, let Brandy in and hurried to the corral. I saddled two horses, led all three around to the front door and tied them to the porch railing, then went back inside to see what she'd piled on the floor. She came out of the bedroom dressed in a pair of Calhoun's jeans and western shirt with clean socks on her feet and a slice of bread clamped between her teeth.

She shrugged. "'mungry," she mumbled as she swept past me, headed for the kitchen and a chair where she could sit while she put on her shoes.

"That's about all I thought we'd need or could carry." She nodded to our emergency kit and some bundles by the door. "There's dry clothes on the bed."

I took a sponge bath and changed while we discussed our chances of getting back to Boyd's Creek without being captured or killed. We decided, after considering all the factors, that we'd probably make it if everyone had gone back there to wait for us. But I hadn't overlooked the possibility that they'd left the horses for us in case we returned and might be waiting just over the next ridge or up at the rest camp.

After I was dressed and had a couple of Spam sandwiches and a warm beer in my belly, I poked around the cabin to see if I could figure out what had become of Calhoun's body. There was no real evidence in the cabin that Calhoun had even lived there. The clothes and boots could have belonged to anyone, although hair samples would reveal a match to Calhoun if they had taken any clothes with them. I suspected they had. The blood on the kitchen floor had been scrubbed but a dark patch remained in the unvarnished wood. Pictures and furniture had been moved leaving clean places in the dust that had settled since Brandy had cleaned, and the cabinets and cupboards had been examined. Calhoun's drugs and needles were gone.

But what had become of Calhoun? His body wasn't under the cabin, nor was it in the storage shed. We couldn't find any place around the perimeter of the forest where Max might have dragged it. It wasn't under the beds or in any of the closets.

"They probably took it," Brandy offered after we had spent an hour searching. "It's almost dark; we'd better get moving."

I nodded agreement, checked the lashings on the bundles, helped her mount, and was untying the pinto when the black pussy cat strolled around the side of the cabin asking to be fed .

"Now I know Calhoun's dead," Brandy said.

"Why?"

"He would have taken Cat."

"If he could have found her." I mounted up and swung the horse away from the railing.

"Richard!" Brandy cried.

"What?"

She looked at the cat and back at me, her eyes wide question marks.

"Oh, no!" I protested. "I'm not going to carry that cat down this mountain. She'll just run away the first chance she gets. Let's go."

"Richard?"

"I'm not taking the cat and that's final, so forget it."

We rode in silence across the swampy meadow, two laden horses, one empty horse, two frightened humans and one scrawny black cat tucked into my P-coat, moving along the ridge until it was too dark to see the trail. At last light we made camp under a cedar which had fallen across some large boulders beside a meandering stream. I built a small fire and cared for the horses while Brandy prepared a sparse meal of skewered Spam slices, dry bread and peach halves which we dug from the can with sticks, sharing the juice to quench our thirst and sharing the Spam with Cat, who had no intention of running anywhere now that she had found a good thing.

When we had finished the meal, I found some large chunks of rotted limbs to lay against the far side of the fire to deflect the heat toward us, pushed a pile of bark and sticks within reach, and spread a ground cover for our bed. Exhausted, we crawled under a single blanket, the three of us snuggling against each other for warmth, and drifted away to sleep.

I was miserable, tossing and rolling to get comfortable and warm, jumping with alarm every time the cat moved or a pine cone fell, waking to put more sticks on the fire, or dreaming everyone in the country was after us with murder on their minds. The cold and dampness crept through the ground cover and our clothes. My kidneys ached; my legs and hips felt as though someone had slipped a knife between the joints. Brandy hogged the blanket and jammed herself under the fallen log completely oblivious to the waking world. Cat was purring contentedly and dreaming, no doubt, of better days.

I was sitting by the fire at four in the morning, warming my hands and back over the newly kindled flames, having given up any hopes of sleeping restfully, when Brandy rolled over sleepily and asked if it was time to get up. Her hair fell in ruined curls over her face as she peeked from under the blanket, smiling and stretching, curling her long fingers above her head and moaning a little when a muscle tightened in her back. She made a sour face, hunching her shoulders, rolled over against the log and closed her eyes.

"What time is it?" she asked dreamily.

"Four o'clock in the morning."

"Why are you up? Come back."

"I just wanted to fix the fire," I lied. "It'll be daylight soon, anyway. You sleep for a while and I'll make some breakfast."

"Ummm."

I pilfered through the bag until I found the emergency kit she'd packed for me days before, dug out the Yuban, the mess kit and water purifying tablets, used the peach can to scoop some water from the stream, got coffee simmering and sliced up some more Spam to hang over the flames. While they sizzled and curled, I went to check on the horses, leading them to the stream so they could drink and graze until we finished breakfast and were ready to ride on. Brandy was up and tending to breakfast, wrapped in the blanket and hugging the cat when I returned. She smiled up at me, lifting a rack of Spam slices and motioning for me to

sit.

"The coffee's ready," she said. "Did you find the creamer?"

"No."

"Hand me the bag."

She found the creamer in another plastic bag and sprinkled some into the peach can, stirred it with a stick and handed it to me.

"Is everything okay?" she asked presently, watching me sip the steaming coffee.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You're pretty quiet."

"Just tired, Peach, and thinking about the rest of the trip. You know how I am; don't worry about it."

"Horses okay?"

"Yeah." I gave her the tin of coffee.

"Are you worried?"

Of course I was worried; I'd be worried until we were out of the forest and away from those waiting for us at Boyd's Creek.

"No," I lied. "Well, a little, I guess. We have a lot of people looking for us and a long way to go before we're safe."

"We'll make it."

"Yes, we will."

Brandy cleaned up the camp site and stowed the gear while I saddled the horses and led them back. She stood watching me, an innocent little girl it seemed, smiling bravely and helping me secure the bundles onto the saddles. I turned to her gravely and held her face between my hands, pulling her to me and embracing her tenderly.

"I love you, Brandy," I whispered. "When we get out of here... ."

She put a finger against my lips, closed her eyes with a resigned shake of her head.

"Don't say it, Richard. Don't make promises you may not be able to keep. I know what you want to say, but I don't need to hear it. I know how you feel, but I know how difficult it will be for us if we get out."

"When we get out."

"Yes, when we get out. Let's do that, then we'll make some plans, okay? But not now, not here." She waved a hand at the forest, dark against the faint glow of the morning sky.

"Okay," I said, kissing her again and helping her onto her horse. "You're precious, Brandy, and I do love you. More than...anything."

"And I love you," she smiled, reaching down to touch my face. "We'd better get moving."

"You feel like carrying the cat?" I asked.

"No."

I threaded the cat into my P-coat, mounted up, and we began the slow climb into the cedar forest above us, riding side by side when we could, always alert for any movement in the trees. We arrived at the rest camp at mid-morning, stopped to water and feed the horses and search for signs that anyone had been there before us. There were none, save the fading tracks left when I stopped and those of Brandy and Max when they had ridden up to intercept me days earlier.

The tiny shelter seemed smaller than I remembered it. The door was mounted crooked and the small windows were not

properly plumbed. Hundreds of pine needles and cones littered the roof, piles of them had blown or washed against the sagging outer walls. For a moment, I thought I saw Calhoun pace past the window carrying a huge stone cross and pointing to the hole that led the way to a white clapboard house in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I couldn't... ."

"Richard! What's the matter?" Brandy cried. She was shaking me, pounding my chest.

"What?" I pushed her away.

"You were staring at the cabin like you were in a trance. What's the matter?"

"I don't know. Oh. I was remembering a dream I had when I stayed here the first night. Calhoun was lashed to a cross and he turned into a house that rained money when I moved the stones away."

"The house in Fort Wayne, Indiana you dreamed about night before last."

"Yeah. God, is that strange? It was so real. Most of the time I know I'm dreaming and I can wake up, but this dream was just too weird." I told her the entire episode, relating in detail every movement, every spoken word.

"Calhoun told me if I rolled the stone away from between his feet I would find the money. But it wasn't really Calhoun. You know how people change in your dreams? You're talking to one person and they become someone else? The person on the cross had Calhoun's face but it was someone else. I don't know... ."

"I think we should keep moving, Richard. This is creepy." She tugged at my arm, urged me to leave.

"Wait. I remember something. I met a Major Barker or Parker in Vietnam. Major Parker. He was in one of the villages I passed through when I was trying to get back to Cam Ranh Bay. There were two or three other Americans there, too. CIA people I think. This property, this cabin, belonged to Major Parker's grandfather. Parker was telling them he was going home to Fort Wayne, Indiana for a week or so to see his family, then he would bring something here and hide it. Or maybe it was the other way around; maybe he came here first."

"But why did he tell you that?"

"He didn't. He told someone else who was in the room. I was on a straw mat in the corner. I was really ill, nearly dead by that time. I may have been having hallucinations."

"Why were you there?" She asked.

"I was trying to get back to the coast. They were tending to my wounds or something. I overheard pieces of the conversation."

I pulled away from her and approached the shack cautiously.

"Son of a bitch! I know what it is!" I cried.

I pushed the table against the chimney and climbed on top of it, stretched to reach the loose stone near the roof.

"This is what the dream meant, Brandy; this is what I heard," I said as I worked the stone from the chimney. "This is what I heard Parker talking about, what Halsey was trying to make me remember for two months. Watch out."

I dropped the stone to the floor and reached into the hole. My fingers touched a small wooden box.

"There's something here but I can't reach it. Give me a chair to stand on."

"Do you know what it is?" Brandy asked. She positioned the chair on top of the table.

"Yes, I do. It's what everyone has been looking for. It's why Calhoun and his buddies have been up here for months. They knew these things were here somewhere but couldn't find them."

I pulled the box from the hole and jumped to the floor.

"These are the plates for the one-hundred dollar bills."

TWELVE

When you come from a small farming community in southern Indiana and lead a sheltered life as I did, you can often be overwhelmed by the enormity of the world and the confusing diversity of human interests. Who can believe, when they are fifteen or sixteen years old, that an entire community of people keep themselves busy trying to gather information about other people? Who can believe that hundreds, even thousands, of men and women do nothing all day long but search birth records, death records, military records, school transcripts, and newspaper and magazine accounts of other American citizens just so they can find one tiny piece of information that might persuade one of those people to do something for an intelligence agency they would not ordinarily do?

Men and women, farmers, shoe salesmen, writers, artists, models, photographers, auto mechanics, even prostitutes are fair game for the intelligence agencies. Soldiers and sailors. Tinkers and tailors. Everyone has something to hide, something they'd rather not have anyone else know.

But the intelligence agencies know; that's their business. Trusting no one, they regard everyone as either a spy or a potential spy. "Us" and "them." It's a kind of sickness, the way I see it, for which there is no cure short of pushing the button and starting all over.

Everything the intelligence agencies do is done to insure the continued existence of the agencies. If they can't find real spies, if they can't uncover real conspiracies, they invent them just to stay busy.

DICE had been keeping records on me for years, since before I was assigned to the Photographic Support Group; long before they sent me to Vietnam to join the recon group on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

But I didn't figure that out until after I had retired from the Naval service. It was the rhythm of the job, I believe, that kept me from thinking about it; the moving, the constant change, the never being settled, the new faces and circumstances, that made me vulnerable to their manipulations. I was always too busy trying to adjust to a new base and new comrades to figure out why I was there.

But the rhythm of work can be very satisfying, especially if you enjoy it and can learn to perform automatically, and if there is the element of constant danger. It keeps you pumped up, keeps the adrenaline flowing, keeps you thinking about what lies ahead rather than what you left in your wake as you passed in the night with your dreadful machine.

Intelligence gathering is not always as romantic as it is portrayed in the movies, but it is always intense. Stakeouts are intensely boring while you are sitting in a car or hidden in the house across the

street watching and listening to a Congressman giving away America's secrets to some little hooker. But it is intensely satisfying when you drop the hammer, and it is intensely disappointing when he walks away unscathed.

The point is that people who engage in intelligence gathering are, generally speaking, dogmatic and dedicated Americans who believe that what they are doing is right. Most of them are selfless; that is, they do not expect medals and citations for their efforts. They do what they do because they've learned to enjoy it. And they do it because they don't know how to do anything else. Some begin to enjoy it so much they begin to work both sides. Some can't give it up and continue working in the closet after they retire, refusing to believe there is a point where they should quit and settle in under a tree with a fishing pole and a six pack of suds.

Others want out so badly that they'll kill to escape the organization. Or they'll stage their own deaths and provide a corpse and medical records as evidence they've been killed.

But no one ever simply jumps up and walks away unnoticed and if an agent lives long enough to retire, well, there are organizations they can join so everyone can keep track of each other.

Dallas Houston Calhoun wanted out of DICE so badly that he arranged his own death after I killed the only other person on the face of the earth who might have known what he was going to do. But Calhoun must have known he couldn't just vanish with the millions of dollars he took from the bunker in Washington State. I don't think he even wanted to. I think he was supposed to take care of the money for the agency until they needed it, because it was getting too difficult to hide it in a Swiss bank account.

No one could ever find the money if Calhoun kept it hidden in a cave out in the forest above Selway Falls unless they knew where Calhoun was and what he'd done. And a lot of people seemed to know just where to find him when the agency decided they wanted to get their hands on the money.

The trail to Austria had been too easy to follow. Helen Calhoun and the kids were living there as if it was perfectly normal to be out driving around shopping and spending money right and left; certainly not the behavior one would expect from people who wanted to keep their whereabouts unknown. I had to believe their actions were a diversion so Dallas could perform some mysterious unobserved service for the agency.

Calhoun had decried the duplicity of the agency when they contrived to recruit him, made a big point of telling us how they had him forced out of his job, kept him unemployed until he had no choice but to accept their offer. But the very fact that Calhoun was alive at all meant someone else was running the show and knew from the beginning that he hadn't been killed. Calhoun's veiled suggestion that he had arranged the deception was chaff in the wind to keep us from finding out what the agency was up to. An operation had been planned which required funding with the money he had stolen and it was apparent from all the activity that it was time to put it into high gear.

The agency was going after Capricorn with the plates or without them.

The flags were up and the engines were running; all they had to do now was clear us off the field so they could begin the race.

* * * * *

I'm slow. It took me damned near two months to figure all this out, and now that I'd figured it out to my satisfaction, Brandy and I found ourselves trapped somewhere between the agents searching for us up on the mountain, and a dozen Neanderthal gunmen sixty feet away, crowded around our motor home at Boyd's Creek.

"Moon hasn't got here yet," Brandy said from a patch of berry canes behind me.

I scanned the camp below us and shook my head. "Not unless he knows how to make himself invisible or arranged to pass by without arousing suspicion." Neither of which would surprise me.

"What are they doing?"

I crawled back up the hill and joined her in the thorns. "They're stopping the cars and searching them. I think they're telling everyone they're looking for escaped convicts or something."

"How are we going to get out?"

"We're going to go around them."

I removed the saddles and gear from the horses, slung as much as I could carry over my shoulder, then waved them away to graze in the tall grass. Someone would find them in a day or two. By that time, we would be on our way back to San Diego.

We made our way across a meadow and into some scrub pines until we came to a barn. Fifty yards up a slight rise was a well kept home which appeared to be secured for the season. We crept around the barn, looking for a way in, thinking we could rest for awhile, sleep in the hay.

It was easy enough to push the large door open enough to get inside, but we found it was not filled with hay. It was an airplane hangar.

A dusty little ultralight sat there. A two-seater. And it looked almost new. I found a can of gasoline, sniffed it to see if it had gone bad, and decided it was fresh enough to run the engine. After checking the oil and all the flying wires and control surfaces, I told Brandy I thought it was our way out.

"I'm not going to get in that thing," she protested, her eyes wide with apprehension. "Richard, we'd freeze to death before we got far enough... ."

"Look," said I. "This thing has a range of about fifty or seventy miles. And it can fly at sixty miles an hour. Sixty miles an hour as opposed to walking one or two miles an hour."

"Still," she said, examining the flimsy machine, "it looks dangerous."

"Not. Safe. Fast. Faster than walking."

"What if the cat gets scared and jumps?"

I motioned toward a burlap bag hanging on the wall. "We'll put her in that bag before we go," said I.

"Oh, God," Brandy groaned. "We're all going to die."

The plane was off the ground fifteen minutes later and I turned toward the highway twenty miles to the north. Brandy clutched the burlap bag to her stomach and hugged my back, trying to stay warm. Even bundled up as we were,

it was going to be very cold flight.

I followed the highway towards Lolo, Montana until, an hour later, the engine backfired and I knew it would soon be out of fuel. I eased off the throttle and glided gently to the highway only a hundred feet below, aiming between the power lines and landing easily on the deserted macadam. The engine quit before the plane rolled to a stop.

We sat together on a boulder, hugging each other to stay warm, each of us lost in our own thoughts about the last few hours but refusing to talk about how close we had come to dying. The wind through the canyon sent tiny dust devils swirling along the shoulder of the road. The collar of my jacket slapped my windburned cheek, but I was too weary to fold it down out of the way. Brandy's hair had fallen across her face and shook fitfully in the breeze but, she, too, could not find the energy to brush it back under her cap.

The cat squirmed away from Brandy and wandered off to investigate the countryside, sniffing and creeping until she caught some tiny, furry beast for dinner, returning to primp and groom in Brandy's lap.

Thus we sat, cold and senseless, hungry and aching for half an hour, heedless of the possibility that an agency sedan might come screaming over the hill and catch us nodding. When an old pickup truck appeared over the crest of the hill and rattled down the slope to stop beside us, I was too tired to even stand or gesture. A rusty old woman leaned over and rolled down the window on the rusty passenger door and spoke to us in a rusty old voice, asking us what had happened.

"Out of gas," I managed.

"What is that thing?" she croaked.

"Airplane."

"Never saw an airplane like that. Where'd you get it?"

"Catalog."

"I'm headed for Lolo if you want to ride that far."

"That's exactly where we're headed, too," Brandy said.

"I don't imagine your airplane will be there when you get back."

"Doesn't matter," I replied as I helped Brandy and Cat into the truck and tossed the carbine into the stream behind us. "We've decided we don't want it any more."

The old woman appraised Brandy with a motherly eye and clicked her tongue. "Can't say as I blame you fer that. Child, you look like you're froze."

Brandy smiled weakly as she slid into the seat and lay back with her eyes closed.

"Yes," she said. "Pretty cold."

The old woman leaned toward me with scolding eyes.

"Ain't you got no better sense than to take a tiny little girl like her up in an airplane in this weather? What's the matter with you?"

"Ma'am," I apologized, "it was a matter of life and death, believe me. It was fly or nothing. She'll be okay."

"I'll be okay," Brandy confirmed.

"You having a baby?" the old woman asked, nudging Brandy awake.

"No. I'll be okay. Really."

"I dunno."

"I will, really."

"She will, really."

The old woman got the truck rolling, ripping through the gears and accelerating to about thirty miles an hour, top speed for the very old and very rusty Dodge. Cold air whistled up through the rusted floor and around the cracked, rattling windows whose fuzzy seals had long since fallen to dust. Not a limousine but, in retrospect, better than walking. Barring the possibility that the vehicle might disintegrate to dust at any moment, we would make Lolo, Montana, her proposed destination, by midnight.

After assuring myself we could get there in one piece, I joined Brandy in undisturbed sleep with my head jammed against the cold metal window sill with the heavy printing plates pressed against my chest.

* * * * *

Lolo, Montana.

Seen at midnight through the fog of sleep it appears to be no more than a restaurant with a gas station and a motel across the road beyond a stop light. It is more than that, but in our addled state we were unable to determine just how much more.

The Lewis and Clark expedition came this way, inching their way up the mountains, disassembling their wagons and pulling them, their mules, tack and gear up the sides of the canyons with ropes and pulleys, sometimes gaining no more than a few yards a day when there were no trails, no outposts, no places to pause so they could replenish their dwindling supplies.

Lolo, Montana, quiet little town on the side of a forbidding mountain, was a testament to humankind's will to endure the wilderness, was a monument of sorts to the explorers who hacked that awful trail to the Pacific Northwest. I couldn't see much, but liked what little met my eye that cold night as we piled out of the leaky truck under the electric blue stars and plodded to the restaurant.

Lolo, Montana was my kind of town.

And Lolo, Montana was Allison Haniford's kind of town, too. The agency had purchased a home for her in Lolo when her brother returned from Vietnam so he wouldn't know she was working for them. They let him believe she had lived in Lolo for years, and I wondered where the house was and if they still reserved it for her.

While Brandy and the old woman wandered off to the ladies room, I searched for a telephone book and tried to find the address. I don't know what I expected to do if I found that Allison Haniford still used the house. If she wasn't there, we might break in and spend the night and if the agents pursuing us didn't know about the house—it having been obtained during Spenser Halsey's reign as Director—it would probably be the safest place on earth to hide at that moment.

I scanned the restaurant, saw no one suspicious, and went to the restroom after failing to find an address for Allison Haniford. When I returned, Brandy was sitting at a table by the door sipping a cup of coffee. I sat opposite her and lifted the cup she had ordered for me, studying her carefully. She seemed nervous and agitated.

"Where's the cat?" I asked.

"Martha wanted her so I let her go."

"Martha?"

"The lady with the truck, Richard."

"Oh," I mumbled. "Well, where's she?"

"She went home. She has a home, Richard, so she went home. You know what a home is, don't you? One of those places where people sleep and eat and take baths?"

"Hey, come on, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong? What's wrong? I'm tired and cold and hungry. I want a bath and I want clean clothes. I want to fix my face and wear my jewelry. My feet are killing me, I have a headache, my butt hurts, I'm tired of running and hiding, and I want to find a warm room so I can get some sleep. Every time I think about Calhoun I want to throw up. Am I supposed to feel good? I hate this stuff, Richard. I hate being here and I hate being chased by people with guns. I'm beginning to hate you for doing this to me. No, I don't want to hear it. I'm sorry, but there it is. You asked and that's my answer."

She fell silent, her face drawn and contorted as she fought to keep from crying aloud, her trembling fingers brushing tears from her eyes. I reached across the table to take her hand but she jerked it away, clenching her fists in her lap and staring into her coffee cup.

I could only watch her in silence, unable to offer an explanation or an apology she hadn't heard before. I could only offer lies and it made me ill to realize I was destroying her.

"I'm trying to get us out, Peach. Tomorrow we'll leave and go back to...."

"Goddamn you, Richard!" she cried. "Can't you see what you're doing to us? If you hadn't decided all by yourself to come looking for Calhoun we wouldn't be in this mess and you wouldn't have to be trying to get us out. You're killing me. You're breaking my heart, damn you, and I hate you for it. It isn't fair. It isn't fair."

I turned away, knowing she was right, knowing I had no way to defend my actions or account for my stupidity, knowing there were no words that could salve the wounds I had selfishly carved into her heart. I punished myself mentally and she let me, refusing to meet my eyes, refusing to let me touch her or offer more lies. Her strength was her truth. She lived by the truths she believed while I did not. I claimed to hate everything the agency stood for, yet I was no better than they and that made my life a lie. She put her finger on it more than once but I always rationalized her truths away, burying them in my own unreasonable ideas of duty and vengeance.

She looked up presently, palming the tears from her cheeks, and raised her chin defiantly. "I don't care what you do now, Richard, but I'm going home. If you're going to do this for the rest of your life, you'll have to do it alone."

She stood suddenly, bumping the table and spilling the coffee. She stared at me sullenly, her eyes flat and empty, her jaw set firmly, daring me to admonish her for her adamant convictions.

I stood, mopping the coffee from my lap with a napkin, and nodded toward the door.

"Okay," I said as calmly as I could. "I'll get us a room and tomorrow I'll... ."

"I can get my own room, Richard. I can even find my own way back to San Diego. I know how to register at a motel and I know how to get an airline ticket. I

did it for a lot of years before you came along and I didn't forget how to take care of myself when I married you. It's time I got used to doing it again."

She yanked the door open, strode purposefully across the white rock parking lot, crossed the deserted highway and disappeared in the darkness near the motel while I leaned against the door like a fool and watched her go.

I thought of going after her, of insisting that she return to San Diego with me, of telling her how much I loved her, but I couldn't get my mind and legs in gear to do it. I didn't want her to leave, but didn't know how to convince her to stay, didn't know how to convince myself I could really keep her from the harm that awaited us. My life and everything important in my life was slipping away from me and I felt powerless to prevent it from happening. The feeling that overcame me at that moment is difficult to define. I felt worthless. Perhaps unworthy would be a better term. I felt undeserving of her love and, watching her walk away, I felt suddenly empty as if someone had turned off the energy that had sustained me.

But I knew, too, that the energy had flowed in only one direction: from her to me. It rarely flowed out again and so I had drained her, taking without returning, demanding without giving, left her, at the end, with little energy or strength to sustain herself. In that moment, that one horrible moment, I knew she was gone. I could only guess what the people from the agency would do in the next few days, the next few weeks, and I could only speculate about my response to their manipulations, but I knew for a certainty what to expect from Brandy.

There would be papers to sign and appearances in court. Then there would be the divorce I would not, could not contest. She'd be better off without me and I owed her that at least.

"Aren't you going after her?" a familiar voice asked, startling me out of my morose introspection.

I whirled, swinging one arm upward while I reached for the door, but David Moon, the cat, the sneaky rat, casually brushed the blow aside and shoved me into the parking lot, wrestled me to the rocks and jammed his thumbs into the hollow under my chin.

"Jesus Christ, man," he growled, "do you swing at everyone who walks up behind you? What the hell's the matter with you?"

I bucked, trying to throw him off my chest, but he dug his thumbs deeper into my throat, paralyzing me into immobility. I held his hands, grimacing with pain until he loosened his hold and sat back on my stomach.

"Now relax, Constable, and get a grip on yourself," he said. "I'm going to let you up because I want to talk to you, but if you start fighting me again, I'll knock you on your ass. I don't care if I talk to you right away or an hour from now when you wake up; what's it going to be?"

"Okay," I croaked.

"Now it is, then." He leaped away like an uncoiled spring, landing on his feet and watching me cautiously until I worked my way into a sitting position with my head down and my arms wrapped around my knees to keep from passing out.

"You okay?" he asked.

"You could have killed me," I whispered.

"Yes, I could have at that. Can you get up?"

"In a minute." I swallowed a couple of times just to make sure everything was still working, then agonized to my feet, wobbling a little and glaring at him through tears of pain.

"You could have killed me, damn it," I said again.

"You don't have too long to live anyhow, the way I see it. What have you got yourself into here?"

He approached me warily, hands cocked before him, fingers stiff as iron rods, legs spread wide and slightly bent, one in front of the other. He sidestepped to my left and motioned for me to join him in his car.

"Calhoun's dead," I said.

"When?"

"A few hours after you left me at the rock. I went back to tell him about Max Hanks' meeting with the four agents. He wasn't even surprised, even hinted he'd planned it that way so he could disappear again leaving everyone to figure it out after they arrested me and hauled me back to Washington."

I told him of the fight I'd had with Calhoun, stumbling through the events as I recalled them, and explained how Max had injected me with some narcotic that had put me out for hours. Moon questioned me, but I couldn't really verify anything after I was tossed onto the bed.

"He was still on the floor in a pool of blood when Max locked us in the bedroom," I added, completing the episode.

Moon shook his head firmly and narrowed his eyes, quickly appraising my story.

"You didn't see his body after that?" he asked.

"No."

"Any sounds that would indicate he was up and walking around?"

"I was in another world; I heard nothing."

"Well, he isn't dead, Richard. He was unconscious, maybe injured, but you didn't kill him. I followed him down to the river that night and watched him load the boat after he and Max had a long-winded conversation beside the storage shed. Max took over and finished loading about midnight. What was Max doing during the time Calhoun was loading the boat?"

"Brandy said she thought he dragged Calhoun to the other bedroom then washed the blood off the floor."

"No, Hanks didn't take him into the bedroom. He may have cleaned up the mess so no one would suspect you had a fight, but Calhoun simply got up and walked away. Listen, Richard, after I left you I went up to the cave to hide and waited for those four agents to show. They didn't know Calhoun was in the cabin that night; they thought it was you, your wife, and Max Hanks. Period. Al Harper and his men were going to try to get down there to see what it was all about but before they could make up their minds to do it, Hanks came back, locked the shed and disappeared. I think he had a plan to come back and finish his business later.

"Calhoun had already headed up to the ridge on the way to the rest camp when Max started loading the boxes and when no one showed up for an hour or

two, Harper and the others decided to go after him. Hell, I just went down, got the money into the boat and took it down river to where they had tied their horses."

"Did they talk about Calhoun, mention him by name?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Harper and the others."

"His name came up a couple times, but seems to me they all thought he was going to be waiting for them here in Lolo."

"Hah! They know he's alive, the bastards."

"What?"

"Nothing. What else did they talk about?"

"Big meeting in San Diego sometime during the first week of October; you know what that's all about?"

I shook my head. "No, I haven't kept in contact with the agency for months; I don't know what it would be."

"Well, I think you should find out, because your name came up a few times, too. Someone has big plans for you, man, and none of them are good."

I stared into the darkness beyond the parking lot, wondering who I could ask, who I could trust to tell me the truth. I could think of no one, not even Steve Dansforth, certainly not Allison Haniford, if she was still alive. Calhoun had tried to convince us he was an injured man who could hardly navigate under his own power and I wondered how he managed to load the boat without help. He seemed to have trouble walking on level ground; I couldn't begin to imagine how he could carry a dozen or so heavy boxes down the steep, narrow path to the river.

"Did Calhoun have any problems walking?" I asked presently.

"It was too dark to see well. He may have been favoring his left leg a little."

"He wasn't using a cane?"

"Pretty difficult to carry boxes that big with one hand, don't you think?"

"What the hell is he trying to do?" I asked. "Why did he want us to believe he was so badly injured?"

Moon shrugged, gazing out across the highway toward the motel. "I don't know. I came after the money. I have no idea what Calhoun's up to; it isn't my problem. I have the counterfeit money, what's left of it, and there's nothing left for me to do but take it to Denver."

"You're really from the Treasury Department, then?"

"The Treasury Department, yes, of course. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Well with so many people running around up there, it was hard to tell who was who." I shrugged an apology. "You know."

He nodded, managed a smile. "Yeah. Look, I'm sorry I had to rough you back there. No hard feelings, okay?"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "It doesn't matter."

I scratched the side of my face and framed another question, wondering if he knew about the real money Calhoun had stolen from Colonel Fourney's bunker.

"And all this money you recovered is counterfeit?" I asked.

"As far as we can determine it's counterfeit. We've only made a cursory examination, you understand, but, so far, the numbers tell us the bills didn't come

from our presses."

"You're not looking for the plates?"

"No. As far as we know they were destroyed in Vietnam in 1972. Why?"

"Just wondered, that's all." I felt for the box inside my P-coat. Maybe they were not the plates for the counterfeit money. "Where's the money now?"

"What?"

"The counterfeit money; where is it?"

"Loaded and under guard awaiting transport to Denver."

"How much did you recover?"

"A lot."

"Like a hundred million?" I ventured.

"A lot," he repeated, refusing to admit more. "So what're you going to do now?"

"What do you think I should do?"

Moon wagged his head toward the motel. "I think you should get your wife and go home before old coyote eats you both."

"How did you manage to keep an eye on all those people long enough to find out what they're going to do" I asked, genuinely curious about his uncanny ability to cover so many bases at the same time.

"I get around."

Damned if he didn't. And quietly, too. I climbed out of the car and stood by the open window with my hands in my pockets, looking at the motel and chewing my lip. Presently I turned to him.

"Thanks for the information, Moon; you probably saved our lives. I think I'll take your advice and go away for a while. By the way, how did you know we'd be here?"

"Didn't. I just went in to talk to the night manager to find out if any of those yahoos came this way. Then I heard the argument and came out to see what it was all about."

It sounded plausible and I accepted it as truth, weighing his advise and words of warning as he searched a pocket for the car keys.

I watched the tail lights disappear, went back into the restaurant and waited for two takeout breakfasts, then hurried over to the motel. I was trying to figure out where Calhoun and his stolen money were when the manager staggered into the office, unlocked the door, cast an angry look at the clock on the wall and glared at me balefully.

"My wife checked in a few minutes ago while I was waiting for these," I said, holding the food up for his scrutiny. "Could you tell me which room she...."

"Ain't nobody checked in since ten o'clock," he interrupted.

"But she came this way," I protested, thinking he might have forgotten.

"She didn't check in here."

"Is there another motel nearby?" I looked through the window and saw none.

"No."

"Could you, maybe, look through your register and see?"

"I don't have to look, mister. Ain't nobody checked in since ten. You want a room?"

I balanced the cartons, staring at him stupidly and wondering what had become of Brandy.

"You want a room or not?" the yawning manager prompted again.

"Not," I said. "No, wait! Yes, I'll take a room."

"You're sure?"

I nodded and he slid a registration pad toward me, leaning wearily on the counter and shaking his head sadly.

"Maybe you didn't hear the bell," I offered as I completed it and slid it back.

"What?"

"Maybe she rang the bell and you didn't hear it."

"I heard you, didn't I?" He glared again. "Twenty dollars."

I dug out a twenty, got a key to number six and headed for the door, pausing outside to frame another protest.

"She didn't," he said firmly before I could ask, then locked the door and padded away down a dark hall.

I stood on the walkway under a dim light and looked both ways, shivering in the cold night air, struggling with my fear while I tried to imagine where she might have gone. There were no other motels and I thought I understood her well enough to know she wouldn't climb into a car, alone with a stranger, at one o'clock in the morning no matter how angry she might have been.

I looked down at the grease leaking through the paper bags, realized the food was getting cold, and walked to number six, fumbling with the key until I pushed the creaking door open and reached for the light switch. In the same instant I heard Brandy cry out in pain as she slammed into me from behind, sending us both reeling into the room.

I groped for her in the darkness, called her name as I struggled to reach for the light. A heavy fist caught me flat on the chest, the blow bouncing me against the bed and onto the floor as the door clicked shut and a man spoke from the darkness.

"Don't even breathe hard," said the disembodied voice, "or you're both going to die."

THIRTEEN

The man flipped the light on and pulled the shades while he held a .380 Browning pistol on me. Brief moments later someone knocked on the door and he stepped aside, opening the door quickly to let the person in.

It was Spenser Halsey.

Brandy was staring wide-eyed at both men, gaping in wonder and confusion as she scooted into the corner beside the bed, clinging to my arm and uttering little cries of alarm.

The gorilla roughed us up while he searched us, pulled the plates from inside my coat and placed them on the small table. Halsey explored the room, stepped over the ruined sack lunches and sat on the bed with his hands in his lap. Presently he touched his nose briefly with an index finger and fixed me with a perplexed frown.

"You don't seemed surprised to see me, Richard," he said. "Why is that, I wonder?"

I explained as briefly as necessary how I'd realized Allison wouldn't have destroyed Fourney's plane knowing he was aboard and he nodded respectfully.

"Allison Haniford didn't tell you?"

"No."

"Not even a hint; just this much?" He pinched the air between us.

"Not so much as a midge," said I.

"Well, you do have an uncanny knack for those kinds of deductions, don't you?" he asked. "And how did you know Dallas was not killed while recuperating in the hospital?"

I knew Halsey well enough to understand he wouldn't have asked the question in such a straight forward manner had he not also known Dallas was still alive, and there was no point in lying to him.

"Actually," I replied, "I didn't. When you and Dansforth told me he was killed, I believed it. I admit I couldn't figure out how someone could get that close to him at Walter Reed, and I couldn't figure out how he accomplished it, how a body could be produced without some help from the agency but, yes, at first I really believed he'd been killed."

"And what convinced you otherwise?"

"I received a letter with instructions to join him."

"Your investigation led you, then, to Calhoun."

"That's right. Why are you here, Halsey?"

He clasped his hands together, working them into a tight knot, sighed lightly, pursed his lips and closed his eyes for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was firm and commanding, revealing the demeanor of a man who was still very much in charge of himself and others.

"Richard," he said, "this may be the last time you and I will have a chance to have any kind of civil conversation so I want you to pay particular attention to the questions I'm going to ask; questions which I expect you to answer quickly and honestly. Clear?"

I nodded.

"Oh, by the way, Richard; do you remember agent Delancey?" He waved his hand at the gorilla.

"He looks familiar, but, no, I can't place him," I answered, watching the muzzle of the pistol wavering inches from my forehead.

"Umm. Well, he remembers you. He was guarding you once in Vietnam while you were making your way back to the coast. You knocked him unconscious, I believe. Out for three or four hours, too. Now, I imagine he'd like to settle the score so I wouldn't make any foolish attempts to escape or tell any lies if I were you. Do you get the picture?"

I nodded again, carefully avoiding Delancey's cold stare.

"Good. We'll begin by hearing the whole truth about why you and Brandy have come up here."

"Does he have to wave the pistol so close to my face?" I asked.

"Of course; he's going to kill you if you lie. Now begin please."

I told them the entire story of the past months; everything that happened from the time we left Fourney's camp in Washington State to my encounter with David Moon in the parking lot minutes before they appeared at the door, taking care to refer to Calhoun in past tense. I figured if Halsey wanted him, Calhoun had been right about the letter and the money and, if he was still alive, as David Moon had suggested, I didn't want to reveal the operation he'd been working on.

Convinced that Calhoun really was

dead, Brandy added events I'd forgotten, confirmed parts they doubted and gave her own interpretation of Max's behavior after I'd killed Calhoun.

"You're certain you killed him?" Halsey demanded incredulously, pushing his face close to mine.

"Dead as a doornail as far as I know."

Halsey turned to Brandy with his eyebrows up, silently demanding confirmation.

"Dead," she nodded.

They questioned us about events that were not clear, asking us to repeat parts that confused the patterns they had constructed in their minds. Halsey listened patiently, appraising the tale with calm composure, his eyes dark and calculating in an impassive face. When we had finished relating all we could remember, he stood and went into the bathroom to wash his face while Delancey parked his carcass in a chair and caressed the trigger of the Browning. I had a feeling he was just praying I'd stand up or try to get comfortable so he could kill me.

Halsey returned from the bathroom, pulled up a chair, motioned us onto the bed and waved Delancey away.

"You trust me not to go berserk and begin tearing down the walls?" I asked, casting an eye across the room at the .380.

"Shut up, Richard," Halsey ordered. "You may think this is some silly game but I assure you it isn't. You have recovered the plates we've been looking for since 1967. I knew you would, given the proper environment and time."

"You sent the letter," I said.

"Of course."

"Why didn't you just ask the people who hid them?"

"They were killed, Richard. All but Delancey here and he was not present when the plans were made. But he knew you were in the hutch and knew you might have overheard the conversation, that you might remember, even in your addled state, where Major Parker had planned to hide these." He patted the carton.

"Major Parker came home on leave, hid the plates, went back to Vietnam and got killed before he could tell anyone where he hid them?" I asked.

"Major Parker and Delancey were separated shortly after you were nursed back to health and sent on your way. Parker and his team went back to their base near the Plain of Jars. But Major Parker was the only person who made it back. Delancey and his team continued to follow you all the way to Cam Ranh. By the time you were safely hidden in the hospital, Major Parker had departed for the States. Delancey never saw him again. But Major Parker was killed the day he returned to Vietnam when someone tossed a handgrenade into his car. He never had a chance to tell anyone where the plates had been hidden."

"Why do you need the plates when you have billions of dollars hidden all over the world?"

"Actually we don't have billions of dollars anymore. Most of it has been spent or destroyed. It's time to print more. A few more questions if you don't mind, then we're going to take a little trip."

Brandy tightened her grip on my arm, her face reflecting the fear that we might

soon be taking our last short ride together down a dark country road. Halsey noticed and scowled contemptuously but said nothing to ease her concern.

"Tell me more about this fellow—what did you call him—Moon? Who is he; where did he come from?"

"He told me he was from the Treasury Department and that he came to get the counterfeit money. Got it, too, and it's on the way to Denver as we speak. He obviously signed on as the guide so he could keep an eye on the Harper gang and us until he could get up to the cabin. I suppose he... ."

"Who is the Harper gang?" Halsey interrupted.

"Albert Harper and the other three fools. I think Moon wanted to know why we were all headed in the same direction."

"Al Harper, yes. So he's here, too. Well, that tells me something. You think he knew that's where you were going?"

"That's what he told me that day when he found me above the river watching Max."

"And you say he found the counterfeit money and is now transporting it to Denver?" Halsey asked.

"That's what he said."

He looked at Delancey, got a quick nod.

Halsey considered our information for half a minute, tugging at his lip and rocking back in forth in the chair. At length he stood, motioned for Delancey to escort us outside, flipped off the light and locked the door.

A large sedan was parked near the office and Delancey prodded us toward it with the business end of the Browning, hustled us in and got into the front with Halsey so he could keep an eye on us. I asked Halsey where we were going.

"For a ride, Richard. Just relax; we aren't far from our destination," he replied as he started the engine and pulled out onto the highway.

He headed north, driving as fast as the winding road would allow until we were twenty miles out of the city then turned onto a steep dirt road leading left into the mountains, winding under the cedars, the headlights probing the enveloping darkness that fell away on all sides. Neither man spoke. Halsey was intent upon watching the narrow road; Delancey on watching us and petting the trigger of the pistol. Brandy crowded me into one corner of the seat, hugging me and trembling with fear. I put my arm around her, patted her confidently and whispered words of bravado in her ear.

It was about all I could think to do.

We arrived suddenly at a clearing packed with a dozen automobiles and as many four-wheel drive pickup trucks, all clustered around a massive two story Victorian mansion. Lights burned inside, casting shadows of moving figures across the drawn shades; men and women scurrying almost frantically back and forth. Armed guards stiffened at our approach, hastened over to challenge us with drawn pistols and waved us on when they saw who was driving the sedan.

"What the hell is this?" I asked from our corner as I began to realize a whole lot of people knew Spenser Halsey was still alive.

"This," Halsey replied as he parked the sedan near the entrance, "is Haniford

House. Take them in, Victor; I'll join you in a minute."

Delancey ushered us toward the front door, shoving and pushing us up broad concrete steps onto a steamboat porch that surrounded three sides of the structure. More guards peered from the French doors as we clomped to the entrance, waved KG-99s in our faces and led us into a library adjacent to the great room while Delancey disappeared into the crowd. Before the agents slid the huge double doors shut I could see a confusing array of computers, communications devices, racks of weapons and rows of file cabinets.

Haniford House had been converted into a command center and, judging from the manpower mustered in the adjoining room, Halsey's part of Capricorn was up to something big.

"What are they doing?" Brandy asked, wandering around the room, touching the oak and velvet furniture, appraising the paintings on the walls and scanning the titles of some of the thousands of volumes lining the bookshelves.

I sagged into a great overstuffed chair before the crackling fireplace, rested my feet on a spotless Persian camel saddle and rubbed my eyes.

"You know what?" I said through my hands. "I don't even care anymore, Peach. All I want to do is sleep for a couple of days then go home. Come here and sit with me; sit on my lap."

She sat, digging at her nails and studying the room, lost in some secret thought she wasn't able to share.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"This is the house the agency keeps for weird little things like entertaining Alan Haniford after he returned from Cambodia so he wouldn't know his sister was working for the agency. When there's no one to entertain they haul all that junk up from the dungeon and start listening to other people's telephone conversations to keep themselves occupied and to justify signing a paycheck twice a month."

"Damn; haven't you got cynical in your old age?" she grumbled. "I don't remember you being this upset when we began this adventure. Misadventure. Ordeal."

"I was; you just didn't hear it."

"Well, I don't feel like hearing it now, either."

After a while she leaned against me and closed her eyes, was soon breathing softly and regularly as if asleep. I was drifting into a restless half sleep when the doors slid open, startling me to consciousness, and a young lady approached us pushing an ornate enameled tea cart laden with food and drink. I sat up, shaking the fog from my head, woke Brandy and looked at the lady questioningly.

"Mister Halsey thought you might be hungry," she explained. "Mister Delancey will be in to question you after you're finished."

She slipped away, pulling the doors closed behind her while Brandy and I stared at the tray of food. I lifted the warming covers from the silver trays, found baked Salmon filets, scalloped potatoes in cheese sauce, creamed asparagus tips and baby carrots. Other bowls contained fresh garden salads, creams and sauces for the fish, and garnishes. A

liter of sparkling champagne chilled in a silver bucket and a carafe of fresh coffee warmed over a brass tripod.

Brandy arched an eyebrow at the feast and glanced apprehensively at the doors.

"I hope this isn't our last meal before they take us out to a shallow grave," she said.

"Don't worry about it. If they wanted to kill us, we'd already be dead. What's in that bowl?"

"Tartar sauce; want some?"

"No; ruins the taste of the fish. What's in that one?"

"Salad dressing."

"I'll have some of that. Pull that chair over here."

She spread a linen napkin across her lap and began working on the meal.

"What time is it? Can you see that clock over there?" she asked presently.

I squinted at the enameled mantle clock above the fireplace. "Looks like two-thirty in the morning. Why?"

"Seems like an odd time to be serving dinner, don't you think?"

"No. They've probably been working around the clock on this thing; they either don't know or don't care what time it is. Besides, it would be nearly lunch time for the midnight crew; we're just getting early chow, that's all."

"I wonder if they'll let us get some sleep."

"I wonder if the room is bugged." I looked under the serving cart, felt along the bottom of the chair.

"For what?" she asked, examining the bowls and chilling bucket.

"Who knows. Maybe they think we're not telling all we know; maybe they think we took the money or something."

"Ask Delancey when he gets here," she offered.

I nodded, sampling the filets, smacking my lips with satisfaction. "I think I will."

We were having a second glass of champagne twenty minutes later when Delancey pulled the doors open and stomped over to stand above us. He glowered at us for awhile then asked if we were finished eating.

"Yeah," I answered. "Look, Delancey, how about telling us why you've brought us here. We don't...."

"Forget it Constable," he interrupted. "You answer a few questions and if we're satisfied with your story we'll turn you loose. If we think you're lying, though, you won't like what's going to happen."

"Whatever you think is fair," I said, knowing they would never let us leave the place alive.

"Right." He nudged the serving cart away and sat on the camel saddle, placed the Browning on his right thigh and cleared his throat.

"Well, the counterfeit money is on the way to Denver to be destroyed. We just spent the last half hour confirming his identity with his agency. Moon is very thorough; in contact with his office almost continually and they already knew he was on his way to the mint."

He looked at Brandy, back at me, tapped his fingers on his thigh for awhile and shook his head.

"What's up?" Brandy asked. "You're all looking for someone, but you don't

know who; someone who has the money that was taken from Fourney's camp in Washington State. Is that it?"

"Oh, we know who we re looking for," Delancey admitted. "But we haven't been able to corner him yet."

I thought that sounded suspiciously like they knew Calhoun was still alive and hiding somewhere but before I could think of a way to ask he turned to me and demanded I repeat everything Allison had told me before she was airlifted from Fourney's headquarters.

"Ah, come on, Delancey!" I protested. "That was eight months ago; how am I supposed to remember? I thought she had quit working for the agency."

"As a matter of fact she's in the adjoining room taking information from the computer in Washington. Very efficient."

"Why don't you ask her what she told me.?"

"We have, but Halsey and I think she may have lied about it. I need to confirm her story. If you tell me the same thing she did, we can look in other directions for the leak."

"Or kill her if we don't," Brandy said.

"Damned right," he growled. "If she's a double agent, Halsey will... . We need to know who was giving orders."

I looked at Brandy. She was staring at Delancey and I knew she was thinking the same thing I was: Something was wrong with his story. If they thought they hadn't got the truth from Allison Haniford in three months they were just keeping her on the team until she slipped up and contacted the person who was giving her instructions.

That had to be Dallas Calhoun. They were working together; always had been.

I stood, paced to the fireplace, paused to warm my hands behind my back, and stared at Delancey. An idea was forming and I didn't like it. A conspiracy loomed, rearing fearfully from my consciousness, that, if true, could destroy the entire structure of the agency and earn Brandy and I a quick trip to the morgue.

"You think of something?" Delancey asked, appraising my demeanor.

"No," I lied, "I'm just trying to remember the way things happened, that's all."

"And?"

"I don't know; I really can't put it together. What I told you an hour ago is all I remember."

His face hardened, dark and ugly, a countenance threatening pain and death.

"Well," he said grimly. "If you come up with anything I want to hear it."

"No, nothing," I said. "Where's Halsey?"

"In the communications room; why?"

"Doing what?"

"None of your business; why do you want to know?"

I walked back to the chair and sat down, leaned my head against the back and watched him through heavy lids. "Never mind," I said presently. "It isn't important."

He gave me a contemptuous look, walked to the door and turned for a moment to glare at me.

"If you have anything to say, Constable, I'd advise you to share it. Halsey

will make life miserable if he thinks you're keeping anything from him, you know."

He slipped through the double doors and I sat Brandy down, talking quickly, trying out my theory.

"Do you see what's wrong here?" I whispered.

"They can't find the money and they don't know who's out there watching them."

"Right, and they've had nearly a year to work on it. Halsey thought he'd have an easy ride but someone has been tripping them up and they can't figure out how their schedule is getting back to the agency."

"You think it's Allison?" she asked.

"Hell, I don't know, but I'll tell you the truth, Peach, I believe we should try to get out of here the first chance we get."

"You think they're going to kill us?" she asked fearfully.

"Just as soon as they find out how much we know about their operation and whether or not we've been transmitting the information to the station in Washington, D. C. Let's find out if they'll let us go sit out on the porch."

We went to the door, found an agent idling nearby and asked permission to go outside. He wandered into the command room, whispered to Halsey, gestured toward the front door, got a nod and came back to escort us out.

We were allowed to sit on the steps but that was the limit of our liberty. Huddled together in the early morning chill we put our heads together and tried to determine what all these people were doing here managing field operations for Spenser Halsey, a man who was supposed to be dead, out of the country or working for a foreign government.

The agent wandered to the far end of the porch, sat in a weathered swing with his arms folded across his chest and pretended he wasn't watching us.

If we were going to escape we had to make a plan fast, try to steal a car and make a run for it before the thirty or forty people inside realized what we were trying to do.

Fat chance.

FOURTEEN

"Do you know why all these people are here, Brandy?" I asked.

"They're trying to protect their operation so they can print more money?"

"Well, that's part of it. They're losing money faster than they can replace it. Calhoun got a few million, David Moon got several million, a billion or so was destroyed in Washington State, and they've spent the rest of it buying bombs and bullets to begin a war in the Persian Gulf.

"But that's nothing more than logistics. The reason the agency people are roaming around looking for people to kill is because they have been ordered to protect the President and a bunch of other people in political positions from a monstrous scandal. Some of those people were in office during the Vietnam war. They knew CIA was printing that money. They knew CIA smuggled it back into this country. They knew the counterfeit money was being used to arm the Contras and finance the Iran-Iraq war and the terrorist activities in the Middle East.

"CIA was flying drugs up from South America that was purchased with counterfeit hundreds. They sold it on the streets for good hundreds and stashed the money in their secret banks accounts to finance their future wars."

"Now Halsey is going to use the same presses and plates to print his own money to start his own war," Brandy said.

I nodded. "Right from this house, I imagine. They're going to bankrupt the country and, eventually, the world. The best way in the world to destroy a country is to demoralize its currency. Control the currency, fuel and the food supply and you've effectively controlled the population."

"But why would they want to do that? It sounds self-defeating."

"Power. When you have all the gold, all the oil and all the food, you can make people do any goddamned thing you want, including fighting world wars. Here's the United States. 20% of the world's population is consuming 80% of the earth's natural resources. That doesn't leave a lot for the rest of the world. Since nobody wants to stop living the good life they must be convinced to kill the rest of the world. That's what's going to happen."

"Now, wouldn't it be interesting to know who took Tom Cheney's place?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Remember the big conspiracy Halsey was puffing about when he had us in the vault under Fourney's headquarters? What if part of the conspiracy is to kill all the station chiefs loyal to the United States and replace them with men whose allegiance is to some self-appointed leader, like Spenser Halsey?"

"Calhoun admitted up front that Cheney was innocent and the agency simply hid the truth and moved another man into his place," I added, "and Halsey was in charge of the agency during that entire period. But that isn't the point, Brandy. This nonsense we're involved in here is not only a way to expose the agency and the President to ridicule and embarrassment, but to control the agency; all of the intelligence agencies. The counter-operation is being conducted to force Capricorn to make a move so he can be captured."

It all made sense: Calhoun had always known Halsey was the mastermind of the Capricorn affair and was here to keep him from carrying out his great plan for world domination by controlling intelligence agencies all over the planet. Halsey had planned the operation and directed all the activities so the maps showing the locations of the money would be delivered to the people who would go back and get it after the fall of the south.

The agency knew Capricorn was still out and Halsey was still alive and the only reason they hadn't killed him was because they hadn't pushed him into a corner yet, didn't know how many people he had recruited worldwide. Then, thanks to Allison Haniford, they got a handle on the entire plan and were ready to move in just about the time I stuck my nose into it.

"Halsey always knew more about the money than anyone else," I said, startling Brandy from some dreamy reverie. "He knew where it was before we ever went out on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he knew when it got transported to Cambodia and

he knew just where it had been stored after it got back to the Stales; that's how he got his hands on it so easily. The one hundred million dollars Calhoun had in his care seems to have vanished again and Halsey is going crazy trying to find it. That's the money that was supposed to help finance his plan to control the world. I wonder if Dallas... ."

The door behind us creaked open and we turned, half expecting to find the hit crew ready to walk us up the hill for our last look at the sunrise. I was almost relieved to look up and find Halsey standing there.

He wagged his head at us, motioning us back inside. "I believe you've had enough time to speculate and I want to pick your minds now to see what you've come up with."

He peered down the length of the porch to prompt the watchdog to lead us back into the house and reentered. We were prodded into the chairs before the fireplace, then admonished to remain seated until Halsey could return to press us for more details. I was searching for something to write with when Halsey sauntered into the room with a towel draped over the shoulders of his velour smoking jacket and his face freshly shaven, looking for all the world like a tourist on his first night in a Club Med hotel. He hitched up his trousers, slid a chair next to ours and groaned onto the leading edge, smiled disarmingly and worked his fingers into a tight knot.

"Well," he said, "you've had some time to ponder the situation now, haven't you? Have you arrived at any conclusions?"

I shrugged and shook my head. Brandy looked at the floor.

"Oh, come now, Richard; surely you two must have discussed what we're doing here and you're part in it. Say you have."

"We haven't," I answered casually. "Actually, we were thinking more about what we were going to do after we got back to San Diego."

He unwound his hands and shook his head, watched us for brief moments and smiled sadly.

"How depressing! I had all these visions of you out there on the porch calculating all the various possibilities of some nightmarish plot and planning some heroic endeavor to stop us."

"I didn't give it any thought one way or the other."

"Are you tired Brandy?" Halsey asked as he sank back into the comfortable chair. "Yes, you're both probably quite weary, aren't you? We'll talk a short while longer then I'll have one of the men show you to your room. Agreed?"

"What's to talk about?" I asked, spreading my hands in a gesture of futility. "I came looking for Calhoun so I could ask some questions. I asked; he refused to answer and now he's dead. All we want to do now is to go home and forget him, let him rest in peace."

"You came specifically to question him, then?"

"I came to ask him some questions about Alan Haniford and his sister, Allison. He could not, or would not answer the questions about Alan to my satisfaction and he stated he knew nothing about Allison. I believe he doesn't even know who she is. There seems to be no

need to pursue the matter further, don't you agree?"

He rubbed the side of his nose with an index finger, squinting at me with eyes that were cold and dark. Presently he nodded and folded his hands across his stomach.

"What have you done with the money?" he asked after a moment of silence.

"What money?"

"The money you took from the bunker in Washington State."

"I didn't take any money. After the plane was destroyed, I passed out and was taken to the hospital. As far as I was concerned, that was the end of the operation until I got your letter."

"Someone took it," he said.

"Wasn't me. Call the Treasury Department."

"I have. They're wondering the same thing."

He struggled out of the chair, opened the doors and called for Delancey.

"In two hours, at five o'clock, we're expecting visitors. I'm going to let you two live that long. But when I send for you I expect to hear the truth; do you understand? If you lie to me again, you will have the unpleasant experience of watching your wife die! And, by God, horribly, too!"

Delancey dragged us from our chairs and shoved us into the hall, jamming his pistol into my back and herding us toward the stairs.

"Just wait," he said. "In a couple of hours we can go through all this for the last time. You can watch while I kill this bitch, and if you don't tell us what we want to know, I'm going to spend two or three hours cutting you into little pieces."

"Stuff it where the sun don't shine, Victor."

When we reached the landing on the second floor, he smashed me into the wall and unlocked the door to the first room, shoved us inside and slammed the door behind us, rattling the key and shaking the knob to make sure we were locked in.

"Two hours and you're dead, Constable. Think about it," he yelled as he stomped away, laughing hysterically.

FIFTEEN

Brandy and I showered together, delighting in the massaging relief of steaming water that washed the dirt, but none of our unresolved anguish, down the drain. We dressed in silence, aware that microphones had been placed in the room to carry our conversations to tape recorders and prying ears in others parts of the house, then lay on the bed, not even bothering to turn the covers down.

Two hours was little enough time to rest before Delancey returned to lead us to back to Halsey and his group of extremist agents but neither of us could sleep. We lay on our backs, three feet apart, with our hands folded across our stomachs and stared at the ceiling like two mindless corpses, each of us lost in our private thoughts of the doom awaiting us.

I wanted to discuss some kind of plan and prepare Brandy and myself for an escape but the hidden microphones prevented it. More than that, I knew Brandy and I had to discuss our personal prob-

lems and get them resolved or, at least, begin a dialogue and keep some kind of intimate communication going between us. If we could escape our present situation and return to San Diego together, perhaps we'd have a chance to put our lives back together and continue with a more normal kind of existence.

But if our marriage was doomed, either because of the agency's constant interrupting of our lives or my own thoughtless pursuits of justice and revenge, I had to know that, too.

"Were you serious back there at the restaurant when you said you could live your life without me?" I asked, turning my head toward her.

"I don't think this is the time to talk about it Richard," she answered petulantly, "but, yes, I was serious. It hardly makes any difference right now, seeing that we have a more serious problem to solve first, but if we survive this I'm still going to give it a try. Oh, I'm not saying we should get a divorce or anything like that, but I have to have something more stable than this, something more productive, something with a future."

"A separation?"

"Yes. For however long it takes me to find out if the trade-off is worth it. If I think being without you, being miserable for the months or years it takes to forget what we could have had is better than running from people with guns and hiding from the rest of the world and sleeping in the dirt then I'll make it permanent. That seems fair, doesn't it?"

It didn't and I told her so, pointing out that she wasn't considering how I'd feel about it. I hated the idea and thought she was being selfish.

She closed her eyes and held her breath, her lips quivering as she fought back her anger and frustration. Presently she eased from the bed and went to stand at the window with her back to me and her hands folded across her chest.

"You think I'm being selfish, Richard?" she said after long moments of silence. "Take a look at what's happening to us here. We may not live long enough to finish this conversation because of your selfishness, your desire to punish people who have manipulated us, but I do want to live long enough to see if I can find some happiness again. This isn't my idea of the great American dream. I'm tired of living like a castaway. I wanted to have a home with roses in the yard. I wanted to spend my weekends with you at the cabin. I wanted to save enough money so we could travel and see all the things we missed when we took our honeymoon trip across the United States. I want to be clean. I want to wear my own clothes and sleep in my own bed. I want to bake cookies and read books. But most of all, Richard, I wanted you to want those things, too, wanted you to be with me, pulling on the same end of the rope instead of having you drag me all over the country trying to hide from people who want to kill us. You know what we are, Richard? Think about it; we're homeless people. You're a runaway and I' m a victim of your raving madness. I hate it and you don't have the right to do this to me. You can do it to yourself but if we get out of here you won't get the chance to do it to me again! I've already promised myself."

She turned toward me, her eyes dark and angry, her lips pursed defiantly, both daring me to deny her accusations and

inviting me to admit my failures.

I sat up, wrapping my arms around my knees and urged her back to the bed, admitted that I'd neglected our relationship and promised to change after we got out of the present situation, asked her to forgive me for my selfishness and stupidity and reminded her that I loved her sincerely.

She walked to the bed and sat on the edge, ready to walk away in an instant if I reached for her, digging at her nails while she avoided my eyes.

"Oh, you're such a convincing bastard, aren't you?" she said presently. "So smooth; so easy with condescending apologies. But I won't allow you to patronize me anymore, Constable; you can't do it. I know you love me in your own twisted way but it isn't good enough; I can can't cope with it. You know one thing wrong with you, Richard? Wait, don't interrupt me; I have a right to say what I think and you have the obligation to listen.

"You know what the big problem is? You're still in Vietnam, you're still on the goddamned patrol you began twenty years ago and you don't know how to turn it loose. You have dreams about it still, calling out to dead men in the middle of the night, waking in a cold sweat, wanting to hug me for comfort, so I know you're still lost in the jungle. But I don't want to be lost, man, and I don't want to share your nightmares about it or your screwed up ideas about revenge while you try to work it out. You're still after the enemy, shouting and running away from something that should have ended the day you retired from the Navy.

"If you can't work that out by yourself, Richard, if you can't resolve it in your own mind, you should try to get help, professional help, and quit leaning on me and draining me of my strength. I didn't marry you to act as your anchor every time you drifted away, every time you felt the pressures of society were too great to cope with, every time you wanted to run away to the cabin without me to drink yourself stupid while I waited to see if you were going to come back or go crazy and kill yourself.

"That's bullshit and you don't have the right to put me through it. You never did. You never will."

I fell back on the bed, her angry words echoing in my mind, thinking the desperation of the moment, her weariness and fear had prompted her to say those things. I wanted to believe she'd feel differently after we escaped and returned to San Diego, that she'd realize we could work it out together, or that I could work it out and we could get on with the life we'd planned when we were married.

But the patrol wasn't going to end just because Brandy wanted it to. I'd gone too far into the jungle to ever get out, had died a thousands deaths for almost nine months, had relived the deaths of twelve other men for twenty years, not because I wanted to but because I had no other choice. I was tormented with the memory of their agony and their deaths not because I cared but because I hadn't cared enough, because the information in the bag had been more important than their lives, had been more important than all our lives. And the sad thing was that, had I known where the information was going, I could have changed everything by simply leaving the damned bag in the jungle somewhere or allowing myself to

be killed, could have saved them from dying, could have prevented Fourney's and Alan Haniford's deaths, too, and Calhoun's injury, could have prevented—or at least postponed—the deaths of innocent people in South America who were being killed because I'd shown the way to the money that was helping finance the rebel army, and I could have kept Brandy and myself from the harm that awaited us less than two hours hence.

So, in my mind, at least, the resolution of the problem couldn't be found until I'd either destroyed the money and the people who were using it or died trying. As dismal as that might seem, one or the other of those solutions seemed my only way out of the nightmare.

But Brandy was right about one thing: I really had no right to involve her while she had every right to divorce herself from it.

And me.

If I truly loved her, as I'd confessed, I knew I'd have to let her go because she deserved more than I could give her. Everyone deserves the chance to find out if they can be happier someplace else, in a different environment away from the madness. Halsey fled from madness to total insanity. Calhoun tried to break the chains that bound him to madness and found it impossible; now I was attempting the same feat and found myself drawn deeper into the mire. Like quicksand, the agency had pulled me in, knowing I could never free myself. For all my struggling, I only sank deeper into their misery.

We lay for an hour and a half, estranged and silent, listening to our hearts beating, the sounds of our breathing in the vast, imprisoning room, remembering whatever dreams we'd shattered with our confessions and failures, until footsteps in the hallway and creaking doors reminded us that we should be up and making plans to escape and run again and hide again, fleeing men with guns and a mad dream to either destroy or restructure the world.

I nudged Brandy on the arm, startling her from some vision of better days, and wagged my head toward the door.

"Time to go," I said.

"Yes." She swung off the bed, her eyes red from crying and lack of sleep, her face haggard, her movements lifeless and uncaring.

It was still dark outside, only a faint glow of dawn tinting the eastern horizon beyond the mountains, a veil of pink and lavender drawn across the sky far away. Too dark to be seen well, light enough to find our way to a vehicle and safety.

Delancey unlocked the door as a dozen men made their way past, ushered us out with his pistol and marched us down the hallway slowly, allowing the others to overtake, then pass us. When the last had turned to descend the stairway, he grabbed me by the shirt collar and raised the pistol to strike me across the face, his way of letting me know how much pleasure he derived from hurting people.

But the blow never fell. The door across the hall burst open and in one deft motion Dallas Calhoun leaped forward, his walking stick dropping Delancey like a stone.

"You do show up in the damndest places," he growled as he grabbed my

arm and swung me across the hallway.

In the next moment he had us stumbling into the darkened room where he'd been hiding, led us to the window and lifted the sash, nodding toward a tree overhanging the roof some ten feet away.

"Out you go," he said, pushing Brandy onto the sill.

"How?" she cried, clinging to the frame in terror.

"Down the tree, damn it. Go!"

"I can't climb down a tree in the dark; I'll kill myself."

"If I can do it with this busted hip, you can do it. Richard?" He held out his hands desperately.

"Go ahead, Brandy," I urged, swinging her legs over the sill. "I'll hold you so you won't slip."

She went out reluctantly, then me and Calhoun. When the window was closed, he pointed the way to the eave, helped me hold Brandy as we struggled to keep our footing on the steep slope, and waited until we had reached the trunk before he stretched for the limb and followed.

On the ground, out of breath and covered with pine tar and abrasions from the rough bark, we squatted in the brush and waited for Calhoun to swing down beside us. He landed awkwardly, rolling away from the injured hip, and lay for a moment until he caught his breath.

"Sorry," I said, "I should have helped; I forgot about the hip."

"Never mind. You aren't going to be around to help me fall out of trees all my life, are you?"

"No, but... ."

"Then it doesn't make any difference, does it? You okay, Brandy?"

"Yeah, right," she growled, "I'm fine. Hey, I love climbing trees in the middle of the night. Can we get out of here now?"

I looked at Calhoun. Even in the dim light I could see that his face was cut and bruised. His lower lip was puffed and puckered, turned black and ugly.

"Sorry about the... that," I said pointing to his mouth.

"You should be," he whispered, then pointed to the gardens on the slope behind the house.

"Let's get a car," I protested.

"Later, Richard," he said, struggling to his feet and leading the way out of the brush. "Something's coming in this morning that I want to see before I can alert the agency."

We crouched, running and stumbling in the dim light, holding onto each other and huffing up the hill through the sweet smelling, well tended flowers and twining trees until we reached the shelter of a rocky promontory a hundred yards above the house. Calhoun held up his hand, pointed to a flat area under the overhanging boulders and inched out to the edge to peer down toward the gardens below.

"Good," he said as he returned, "We got away without being seen but I don't imagine it'll take them long to find us; we left a pretty good trail through the wet grass down there. You guys doing okay? I stached some blankets and coats over there in that crevice."

I nodded; Brandy looked away with unveiled disdain, fetched a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"What's so important that we have to stay here, Calhoun?" I asked. "It'll be

daylight soon and if I know Halsey, he'll mount a full-scale search for us the second he finds we've escaped. How the hell did you find us? What're you doing here; you going to kill us now?"

"I got here long before you did, friend. Left the cabin about an hour after Max locked you in the bedroom. You broke a couple of my teeth, by the way, damn you, and I thought you'd broken my neck, too. So I owe you a good one someday. I've been hiding up here since yesterday afternoon; I knew Halsey'd find you and drag you out here to find out what you know. And the reason we're staying is because I found out last night that a truckload of equipment is rolling in here in about an hour and if it's what I think it is, it'll be what we've been looking for for the last twenty years."

"Which is?" I asked.

"Which is what the operation has been all about, my friend; the printing presses and counterfeit plates Fourney smuggled out of Vietnam for Halsey back in 1968. Halsey went to get them after he left Colonel Fourney's airplane up in Washington. They were brought over on a steamer and stored in a warehouse in Canada until Halsey could find a place like this one where he could set up his operation. He'd have set it up at Fourney's headquarters if you hadn't destroyed it and no one would have been the wiser. With Fourney dead and that part of the operation mopped up, we and the Treasury agents working on the problem would have abandoned the area and Halsey would have moved right back in."

I corrected the part of his story he'd got wrong, told him about remembering the conversation and finding the plates that Halsey now had in his possession.

"Well, I figured that's what they were trying to pry from you," he said. "The press had been sitting under guard in the harbor at Haiphong, Vietnam while everyone waited for the right moment to move it. Did you look at the plates?"

"Yes. I'd say they're the same ones that were used in China."

"Perfect?"

"Perfect."

"Listen, Richard, I'd been conducting investigations of Halsey almost a year before you got involved. Houser and Steve Dansforth suspected Halsey was the mastermind of the smuggling ring, that he was Capricorn. They knew Halsey was an ace from killing you because he was afraid you could point to him as the only person who knew what was in the bag, but we had to find out what he was up to, see? He never turned the information over to the agency, Richard; he put it away in his private files and waited for the opportunity to go back and get the money. And the only reason Halsey didn't kill you last year was because he knew you were the only person still alive who might be able to find those printing plates."

I shook my head, realizing for the first time how intricate Halsey's plan had been. The money was never anything but a diversion as far as he was concerned. He smuggled both counterfeit money and the money from the Sanction and Relieve operation back to the States for no other purpose than to keep several hundred people busy while he made his plans to get his presses set up and rolling. He knew the stolen money was traceable so he spread it around every place except

where he planned to begin printing the money he would use to finance his scheme to destroy the countries he sought to overthrow.

"This big dream he has," I said. "Does it begin with the intelligence agencies? Is the plan to control them first and, through them, the governments of the countries he thinks are necessary to effect control over the rest of the world?"

"Of course," he shrugged. "Who controls the government? Intelligence agencies. Who decides when and where we re going to have a war? Intelligence agencies. Who arranges things to make it look like we've been attacked so we can go in and take over a country? The intelligence agencies. Where were you when the government released the news that our destroyers had been attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats in the Gulf of Tonkin?"

"The Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington," I said.

"The North Vietnamese insisted they had sent no boats out to fire on our destroyers. They didn't want America in their country; they'd just spent twenty years trying to oust the French and they'd just about done it. Inviting us in would have been stupid, would have prolonged a war they wanted to end so they could rebuild their country. The boats—if there were any—were sent out by us, Richard. The intelligence agencies sent them out in the dead of night to make it look like the North Vietnamese wanted to start a war with America. It was just one act of many they performed to get us in the country. We wanted their natural resources, wanted to control their economy, wanted to expand our territory and get a foothold on the Asian continent a stone's throw away from the Soviet Union, right in China's back yard.

"How many people, Americans and Vietnamese, were killed over there do you suppose? How much suffering on both sides for lost, dead and maimed sons and daughters? How much was lost in downed or abandoned aircraft, expended ammunition, damaged ships, destroyed farms and villages? And all to get their hands on that counterfeit money."

"And it's still going on," Brandy mumbled.

"What?"

"I said, it's still going on. Halsey wants the money so it'll go on forever, so people like him and you will always have something to do with their leisure time. Kill people. Burn down their houses. Rape their children. Destroy their futures. And when that's done, start killing someone else."

Calhoun was quiet for awhile, alternately watching the area below and turning to look at Brandy. After some time, he stretched his legs and crawled back to the edge of the precipice ten feet away.

"Did you bring the cat like you promised?" he asked presently.

"Brandy insisted."

"I gave her to the lady who drove us to Lolo," Brandy explained. "I wouldn't have if...."

"No, that's fine," Calhoun nodded. "All I asked was that you bring her down off the mountain; I can't take care of her anyhow. You think the woman is okay?"

"Oh, yes," Brandy said. "Cat took to her right away. I think she'll be okay. I'm sure she will."

Calhoun nodded again, gently massaging his hip.

"How's the leg?" I asked.

"Okay for now. You've about got me convinced to get to a doctor who'll tend it properly."

"And?"

"I'm thinking about it. Maybe Max'll quit bitching at me."

Calhoun sat and stared at the brightening sky, his eyes scanning from north to south along the horizon as if he were seeing the sunrise for the first time in his life.

Or perhaps for the last.

He was quiet, breathing softly, his face sadly calm. After nearly a minute, he looked toward us and I could see his eyes were moist.

"No, it never ends," he said.

"I'm sorry," Brandy said.

"For what?"

He struggled to his feet and made his way to the edge of the boulder again, wiping away the tears quickly as if he hoped we wouldn't notice. He sighed, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, composed himself and turned back to us.

Calhoun; a man who had lost everyone he loved.

"Calhoun?" I prompted after a long silence.

"Hah?"

"Would you have killed me the other day if I hadn't knocked you unconscious?"

"No. I wanted you out of my way for a day or two so I could load the money into the boat and get down here to intercept the plates and presses. The drug Max injected into your arm was supposed to keep you in a stupor until Harper and the others could reach the cabin and take you away. They tell me you tore a hole in my roof; I can't imagine you'd have the strength to do it."

"Why didn't you just tell me what you are doing so I could help?"

He shook his head, looked at the grounds below. "I didn't want you involved, Richard. When Allison let me know you were out there looking for me I did everything I could to lead you away. Problem is I couldn't devote enough time to it because we were trying to get a handle on Halsey. Then I called the agency and they sent Harper and the others out to take you in. I forgot how resourceful you can be in the face of disaster."

"You could have told me to leave."

"I did, remember? But then Brandy came up and Max told me about Moon and we didn't know who he was. So we had to keep you for awhile. Things got out of hand, you began snooping around and we got word that someone had been up to the cave; that's what Max and I talked about the day you went down to the river."

"Moon," I said.

"It figures. We thought he was with Halsey."

"Treasury."

"I know that now. Still, at the time we figured we'd been found out. To make matters worse, Allison was unable to contact us because Halsey was keeping her under surveillance so we had to jump and run without asking a lot of questions."

"Well, I'm sorry about your teeth."

He waved the apology away and rubbed his jaw for awhile. Presently he spoke again.

"You know," he said, "what I think is not important, but I believe you two should try to work things out after you get home and quit thinking about leaving each other. Nothing gets solved that way, especially something like this, something that wasn't your fault, that you couldn't have prevented if you wanted to."

"You were listening!" Brandy cried.

"Quiet," Calhoun shushed. "Allison listened. I had to know if I should start shooting up the place if you said something to incriminate me. We certainly didn't spend the two hours sleeping. Allison was monitoring your conversation and trying to extract information from Halsey's computers, which, by the way, leads to our biggest problem in a few minutes."

He looked at his watch, turning his wrist to catch the light. Max and Helen and his children; Tom and Jessica and his father and sister; everyone got locked into a secret room for awhile as he got back to the business at hand. But later, when he had time to remember, he'd drag them out and work his way through their lives until he could put them to rest.

"Halsey's got this operation organized like a military base. He doesn't let anyone leave the communications room until all the programs and messages have been checked to see if anyone has compromised vital information, either purposely or through error. If he finds they have he has them shot on the spot. Allison contacted Washington the minute she found out the press might be arriving this morning and he's going to find that out in twenty minutes or so. That'll tell him two things: An attack is imminent and Allison was planted to shut down his operation. A lot of people are going to be looking for us pretty soon now."

I felt for the .45 in my pocket, avoiding the look of resignation in Brandy's eyes and asked Calhoun what chance we had against Halsey's three dozen thugs.

"A little. Albert Harper and the others are out there waiting for the truck to arrive so they can block the road, and the assault team from Boise is over there if they followed my instructions." He waved a hand toward the forest on the east side of the mansion.

"They did get here, then," Brandy said.

"Yes. The next morning. That was them waiting at your motor home up on the Selway. They were going to take you in and get you back to San Diego and out of harms' way. Allison Haniford has been working inside from the beginning. But not her brother. That's how they knew what we were doing every minute."

Calhoun groaned and sculled his way over to the edge of the promontory with the walking stick, stood surveying the scene below as he rocked back and forth, trying to limber up the injured hip. He hobbled back and forth along the overhanging rock, pausing from time to time to shake his head and utter quiet exclamations of disgust. Presently he walked over to stand above us.

"See why I've wanted out of the agency for years?" he asked. "I've lost control of my life; ever since I killed Tom Cheney. Life with Helen was dreary

enough before that, but it was impossible after. I couldn't quit thinking about what I'd done and it affected everything else I did in our relationship. Just when we should have been clinging to each other for strength, we were drifting farther and farther apart. I alone was responsible for that; I think I hated myself so much that I subconsciously forced everyone else to hate me, too. I see that happening to you two now and it saddens me more than I can express. No, I know you're going to say you don't deserve such shabby treatment, Brandy, and it's true; you don't. But Richard doesn't deserve to be brushed off so casually, either.

"He had a tough time in Vietnam; I'd be the last to deny that, but none of it was his fault. Halsey personally chose him for the mission so Halsey's to blame for his behavior now. Everyone on that patrol was expendable except Lieutenant Hood; you're lucky he came back alive, that you had the good fortune to meet and marry him. It could have been different. I'll tell you the truth, it was a miracle he wasn't captured and imprisoned for the last twenty years. You think his behavior is unpardonable now? Think of meeting him after he'd been a prisoner all that time. Those who died may have been the lucky ones."

He lapsed into a moody silence, leaning on the walking stick and sighing sadly from time to time until the sun was creeping over the distant cedars, turning the fog in the low places to a silver waterfall churning in slow motion down the canyons and around the boulders.

"Truck's coming," he said, tapping the cane against the side of his foot.

We rose, scanning the grounds below as a dozen men wandered out to meet the approaching vehicle. "So is trouble," I said, pointing to the gardens where four of Halsey's gunmen had assembled to inspect our tracks cutting through the manicured lawn. They conferred briefly, pointing and gesturing, then one of them returned to the house while the others proceeded toward the base of the rocks below us.

"Damn," Calhoun swore as he flipped up the safety of his .380. "I was hoping we'd have a little more time to do this. Look, if you want to take Brandy and get away, there's a trail up yonder that will take you back to a side road where Al Harper and the others are waiting to charge the house. They'll have vehicles down there and they always leave the keys in the ignitions when they're doing this crap so they can make a quick getaway if they have to. Just grab the first car you find and get out, go back to San Diego and someone will contact you there for your report."

"What about you?"

"I'll keep these three busy for you. Besides, I have to destroy the presses and the counterfeit plates, try to put Halsey out of business."

"That doesn't look like it's going to be real easy to do," I ventured, noting that one against thirty was going to make for a real short gunfight.

"Twelve against thirty," Calhoun corrected. "And eighteen kilos of C4 plastic explosive planted here and there around the house."

He pulled a remote detonator from his pocket and turned it in the light.

"But you can push the button after you

get on top of the hill," I said. "You're too damned close and you're going to be busy shooting at those buzzards down there. Come on, Dallas, go up with us."

He shook his head. "Not until I see the plates taken inside the house. Then I'll blow it and meet you on the other side."

I looked up the slope. It was steep and treacherous and would be an exhausting climb for Brandy and I; he'd never make it alone with the injured hip trying to pull himself over the rocks with the walking stick in one hand. Brandy stared at me stonily, knowing from my hesitance that I had already decided to stay to help keep the three gunmen away until Calhoun was satisfied he could set off the explosives. Her eyes flashed to Calhoun, the house and the group of men gathered in the driveway, back to me and to the hill above us.

"Good-bye, Richard," she said sadly as she turned to make her way up the damp, steep trail.

"Go with her, you stupid son-of-a-bitch!" Calhoun growled. "I can take care of this by myself. I would have to do it if you hadn't stumbled into my life anyway. Go on; go with her."

"Can't, Dallas. I left three comrades in Vietnam under similar circumstances and I imagine they're all dead for it; I have to do it different this time. Besides, I can catch up with her as soon as we take care of this."

"Obstinate ass! Okay, take that side; two of them are coming up over there." He pointed to the left, indicating a mass of boulders a hundred feet away where two of the men had squatted trying to locate us.

"They haven't spotted us yet," I hissed.

"Give em time; they will. You notice what they're carrying?"

"No, I... ."

"AK-47s, man, and you can bet they're fully automatic. That's another one of those sweet things Halsey smuggled back from Southeast Asia. Thousands of automatic weapons to arm his new world soldiers. His people carry the best assault rifle ever built to protect his ass whether he succeeds or fails."

"If he succeeds they keep the peace with AK-47s. If he fails they saw up the world while he makes his escape."

"Right. Now, shut up and watch your side."

I turned my attention to the pair below me, noting they had split up and were advancing on separate trails; one in a straight line, the other in a circle to get above and behind us. They'd got a fairly good fix on us. We got down on our stomachs on the cold stone, inching our way back and forth as we kept tabs on the men under the overhang. It was obvious the man directly below me would soon be out of sight under the boulder and I didn't want that to happen. He might suddenly appear a few feet away with his rifle stuck under my nose, squeezing the trigger until the damned thing was empty and my head was laying splattered all over the side of the hill.

I rolled over and looked up the trail; Brandy was out of sight and had probably made it half way up the hill by now. If she kept going, she'd be away and gone before the second man could get above us, but if he saw her footprints in the mud he

might go after her instead of coming back down to help his pal. I looked back toward the area where I'd last seen him, found him forty feet higher and making good progress at getting around us.

It was a good strategy, but dangerous. One of them was going to draw fire sooner or later, but that would pinpoint us and the others could keep our heads down while they made their way right up to us. After that, it was just a matter of firing enough rounds until they killed us. I've been here before, I thought. Pinned down with injured comrades while the enemy tried to surround and kill us, half a world away in another jungle, no more threatening than this one for being alien, no less deadly for being farther from home. Death in both cases was only a heartbeat away; the slug bearing my name a second from being fired.

Calhoun rolled to the far side of the boulder, positioning himself for a shot at the man who had worked his way to within fifty feet of us on that side. He held up his hand to me, cautioning me to wait until the last possible second before I gave away our position, holding his breath and grinding his broken teeth the way every soldier does in that instant before the world explodes around him, in that split second before lead flies and trees and stone are shattered, in that brief interval before life changes forever no matter whether you live or die.

The man scrambling to get above us was too close to making it and was getting out of range of the .45. Ten seconds and twenty steps would put him out of sight in the trees and rocks behind us and I knew if any of them was going to kill us, he would be the most likely to get in a position to do it.

Disregarding Calhoun's poised hand, I thumbed back the hammer of the .45, steadying the Colt on my left forearm, and squeezed the trigger. The explosion was deafening in the hollow of the boulders around us, the pistol bucking up toward the sky as the slug rocketed toward its victim. In less than the blink of an eye the mindless spinning missile found its target, thumping into the man's side four inches below his left armpit, sent him jerking upright with a look of shocked horror and slammed him sideways onto the rocks.

He kicked, running from death like a headless chicken, and slid down the muddy trail feet first to stop only inches from his comrade.

God, I hate automatic weapons! The AK-47s were rattling away so close we could smell the fear that pulled the triggers, the slugs mowing down everything in their paths, turning stone to dust, wood to pulp.

Calhoun was cursing and trying to protect himself from flying debris by holding his hands folded behind his head, his face mashed into the rock, his pistol waving uselessly above his neck. A moment of silence, hard to determine after the ear-shattering noise, indicated one of the men was changing magazines, another changing positions. I jerked my head up, scanned the area below and popped down again before thirty or forty rounds exploded off the rock behind me.

The man on my side was firing, the man on Calhoun's side was closing in for the kill. One of them could keep us pinned down while the other advanced. Below them, near the house, a group of

their pals had gathered to peer up the hill and watch the show.

Calhoun fingered the detonator, his thumb sliding back and forth across the key nervously as he watched the progress of the effort to off-load the equipment in the driveway.

"I think they're taking the press in!" he called out. "Can you make out what they're carrying? The two men following Halsey?"

Did he expect me to stand up and look? I could hardly see the trees twenty feet away without getting shot; I wasn't about to get out there on the edge of that rock and survey the countryside.

"Looks like it to me," I lied, still face down on the rock.

More rounds splattered off the boulder above, sending shards of rock and drifting dust raining down on us.

"Are they in the house yet?" he screamed above the noise.

"In," I lied again, knowing it made no difference. With eighteen kilos of C4 all set to go off at one time, they could be a block away a still be killed. I figured everything on the estate, including us, was going to be barbecue a couple of seconds after Calhoun tapped that key.

"Right," said Calhoun.

Click went the key.

Man, you never heard such a racket in your life. That beautiful house and everything around it was instantly vaporized, a boiling cauldron of fire and smoke sweeping into the morning sky, the concussion bending and stripping every tree within a hundred yards and tossing automobiles, boulders, people, printing presses, and everything not nailed to the ground half a mile into the air.

In very small pieces.

I hoped Calhoun had reminded Albert Harper to find a ditch to hide in until everything quit falling before he made whatever attack he thought was necessary.

I peered over the side of the rock, spotted the man on my side sprawled awkwardly at the edge of the trail impaled on the scrub tree over which he had been thrown by the force of the explosion. Calhoun fired two quick shots at the man on his side, the Browning pistol's odd ka-chop-pa ka-chop-pa report echoing through the trees. He popped his head up to make certain he'd killed him, holstered the Browning, scooted back to the shelter of the overhanging rock and motioned for me to join him.

"I want you to get going now," he said, jerking his head toward the ridge above. "Brandy'll be wondering what the explosion was and worrying that you might have been killed. You can catch her before she gets over the top; get going."

"Allison Haniford wasn't in the house I hope."

"She was leaving just about the time I found you two in the hallway. Now get out of here."

"You're not coming?"

"Not just yet, Richard. I may go back down to see that Harper takes care of things properly and make certain the plates were destroyed. If not, we want to recover... ."

"You going to disappear again?" I asked.

He looked at me sideways and almost smiled. "That's a very indiscreet ques-

tion, Constable. Whether I do or not is none of your business. Take off."

That meant yes as far as I could figure and I asked him if there was anything I could do or say in the coming days to support his plan.

He scratched the stubble under his chin, peering over the rock at the last fragments thumping to the ground below.

"Probably not. Besides, I have things worked out so I can vanish for good this time."

"Did you die in the explosion?"

"It's a thought, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Where will you go? No, forget I asked; I don't want to know. Any chance we'll meet again someday?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it. I'm not sure I like working with you, Constable; I'm beginning to see that you're not suited to this business. You're too damned unpredictable and I might end up dead from it if I'm not careful."

I shrugged, reminded him I told him the same thing about myself a year earlier when he tried to get me involved. Then, because he'd never explained it to my satisfaction, I asked him why he'd got me involved in the first place.

"Because Halsey was planning on killing you and I didn't want that to happen. Wait! Before you thank me for being such a pal, let me say that we needed you to find those plates and act as a decoy to draw these people from their ratholes. I told you that and it was true. Well, Haniford crawled out, and so did Fourney and Halsey. Operation Capricorn is closed."

"Yeah, but... ."

"But nothing. Just shut up about it and get going; Brandy'll be driving away if you don't catch her."

I stood, reached down to shake his hand and surveyed the hill above.

"What are you going to do about Helen?" I asked.

"Do? Nothing. What's to do? Let her live in peace without having to worry about someone knocking on the door asking for me or sneaking around the house with a pistol. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "Same thing I've always done, I guess."

"What, sit around the cabin smoking pot and drinking yourself unconscious while you pretend you're writing the great American novel? That's a terrific idea, Richard! It's none of my business, but I'm going to tell you what you're biggest problem is; and it has nothing to do with what happened on that patrol twenty years ago, either.

"Your problem is that you're afraid of being a nobody; that's why you've never finished the novel. Either that or you're afraid someone will like it and you subconsciously fear success. Which is it, I wonder? Fear of rejection or fear of success? A little of both, perhaps."

"Maybe I simply feel the doing is more rewarding than accomplishment," I said defensively.

"Work for its own sake?"

"Yes, something like that."

"That's bullshit and you know it. I never met a man—or a woman for that matter—who didn't wish to be recognized for something more than the fact that he worked ceaselessly at meaningless industry without ever having accom-

plished something. Is that what you want on your headstone when they plant you?"

"No," I answered hesitantly. "I guess not."

"You're damned right you don't; nobody does. But do you really know what you want to do with the rest of your life?"

I shrugged, looked away and shoved my hands in my pockets.

"Hmmm," Calhoun ruminated. "I suggest you make your peace with Brandy, admit you've been a stubborn, thoughtless ass, get down and kiss her feet and beg her to give you another chance to pull your marriage together, then take her out there in the wilderness where...."

"She's tired of the wilderness, Calhoun."

"Take her to Hawaii, then. Go to the Seychelles; anyplace will do. Think about what you're going to do for the next fifteen or twenty years. Redefine yourself as a person. Think about where you've been; discover who you are and where you're headed. You get my drift?"

"But what can I tell her, Dallas? What can I say that won't be a lie? What promises can I make that can convince her I want to change, want to spend my life in peace with her?"

"You ask that as if you expect me to come up with a speech to solve all your problems. You think I have nothing better to do than hold your hand and walk you through the next month or so?"

"I'm sorry," I puffed. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Yes, you did. Think before you speak. Listen to what you say as if the situation were reversed. What's happened to you, man? If I asked you to teach me photography, what would be your response, assuming you could conjure up one? Oh, I know you're thinking: Sure, I'd take time to do that, to teach this crippled has-been all about photography. That's stupid. Why postpone your life to teach me something when you know I'll never use the information? How can you expect anyone else to respect your time when you have no respect for it yourself? Getting your priorities in order isn't selfish, Richard; it's intelligent. How much longer do you think you're going to live, anyhow? What you do with the few precious years left to you and Brandy depends entirely on how you use your allotted time to achieve your chosen goals."

He held up his hands, waving away my protesting questions, folded his hands across his chest and lay his head back against the rock, closed his eyes and sighed heavily.

"That's it," he said. "Get out of here so I can think about *my* life."

I reached for the ledge above, pulled myself up and looked back. Calhoun appeared to be asleep, breathing lightly, his legs thrust out before him, the walking stick abandoned at his side.

"See ya', Calhoun," I said to the silent forest as I turned to the steep trail leading to the ridge above, to safety, to freedom.

SIXTEEN

Three weeks later I was busy packing everything I thought I'd need to stay on the road for a year, cleaning out the house in San Diego and discarding thirty pounds of junk mail in a fit of hyperbole

when Steve Dansforth knocked on the door. He scowled at me curiously, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his trench coat as I ushered him into the kitchen and asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee.

He nodded, shed the coat and draped it over the back of a bar stool, pulled out a chair and sat at the table, resting casually with his arms folded across his chest.

"We expected you weeks ago, Richard," he said. "Where've you been?"

"We made a trip to Indiana to pick up something we left there and decided to take our time coming back. Why?"

"We'd like your report, if you don't think its an inconvenience, so we can close the operation; you're holding us up. Think you can come downtown this afternoon?"

I pushed a cup of coffee his way and sat down opposite him, spinning my cup on the table and avoiding his eyes while I tried to think of an excuse to get him out of the house before he got too curious about the bulging parachute bag piled on the floor with my luggage.

"Actually," I said, "I have it here." I extracted my report from the briefcase I'd shoved under the table and handed it to him. "Did the whole thing on the road."

He opened it, scanned the pages quickly and slid it to the corner of the table.

"What are you doing now?" He waved his arm at the cluttered house.

"I was planning on leaving for the cabin in an hour or so, Dansforth," I said, motioning toward the luggage. He looked, counted the pieces, turned back to me with his eyebrows up.

"Where's Brandy?" he asked.

"Waiting for me at the cabin," I lied, "and I don't want to have to spend all day going over the report with you, Steve; can we review it later?"

"On one condition, Richard; you come in to answer any questions that might arise after Houser reads the report. But a debriefing is in order. Agreed?"

I agreed reluctantly, knowing he wouldn't give me any peace until I told them everything I knew about the final days of the operation. The questioning wasn't quite a grilling but Dansforth was thorough, repeating questions in slightly different form and recording my answers, particularly those concerning Calhoun and Allison Haniford. He told me what we could say and what we could not repeat about the operation that we had just completed. He reminded me that nearly all of the details of the operation were highly classified and that accidental or deliberate disclosure of much of it carried the death penalty.

An hour later he played back the recording and asked me to read, correct and sign the written report. When I slid it back to him, he pushed his coffee cup across the table, asking for more.

"We hoped to question Allison and Halsey and get some answers," he said. "I don't suppose we ever will find out what happened to the money. You don't know anything about it, do you?"

"The only money I know about is the counterfeit stuff David Moon recovered and that's only hearsay because I never saw it," I said, hoping he wouldn't ask to inspect the parachute bag. "How much money are you talking about?"

"There's probably half a billion unaccounted for if the people in the lab put

all the other pieces together properly. Someone's going to have a mighty good life, aren't they?"

I thought about Calhoun, realizing why he hadn't come up the hill with us; he was going back to gather up his future. Calhoun, that wily rascal, had outwitted all of us right from square one. He knew, too, we could never tell the agency we had left him alive because they would know we helped him escape, and if they didn't silence us, he could come back any time and do it himself.

But what about Allison Haniford? Dansforth had just referred to her as if she had been killed with Halsey and the others when the house was destroyed. Did that mean she hadn't got away from the house in time and was killed? Or did that mean she had escaped and joined Calhoun later, to help him recover the money and disappear to lead her own secret and private life? Or did it mean they were escaping together?

Dallas and Allison lovers?

They'd been in contact with each other throughout the entire operation, both of them determined to stop Spenser Halsey, the man who was really responsible for the deaths and anguish of so many people they both loved. They were both alone, everything in their past destroyed; would have they have turned to each other for a new future?

Well, well.

I shook my head, marveling at their cunning, knowing they'd manipulated me into providing each of them with the only permanent way out of the agency, chilled by the thought that if I ever revealed what I knew I was a dead man.

Dansforth touched my arm, startling me back to the present, and asked what I was thinking about.

"The money. I guess you could do just about anything you wanted if you had a half billion dollars."

"Umm," he mused. "Well, we're done with it but I imagine Treasury will work on it until everyone is dead. How long will you be gone?"

"How long will I be gone where? To the cabin? A week maybe or a month; who knows?"

He sat back and smiled sadly, a kind of friendly, sympathetic smile, rapping his knuckles on the table.

"You don't let anyone in, do you, Constable? Not me, not even Brandy. I know you've sent her off somewhere and you're going to join her. Okay, okay, it's none of my business and you don't want advice but I'm going to give you some anyhow. Don't jump up and run off in fourteen directions at once thinking you can use money to hide from the world. I've hidden from the world. Calhoun is out there somewhere hiding from the world. You can't do it and be happy at the same time. It wears you mighty thin in short order."

"What makes you think we're going to do that?"

"Because we've been looking for you since you left Lolo and I know you've been driving all over the country trying to erase your life histories, saying goodbye to everyone and warning them not to answer too many questions. You can do it, you can hide, but you'll grow to hate each other for it and it isn't worth the few weeks or months of peace you'll

find."

"We're not...."

"A piece of advice, then I'm leaving," he interrupted. "Stay in contact with your people; don't shut them out of your lives. Stay in contact with us, too, if you feel you can because we'll find you anyhow if we want you badly enough. You see what I mean?"

I nodded and turned my attention to the parachute bag on the floor, wishing I could be on my way to Brandy and the future that awaited us.

"I don't know," I shrugged, knowing perfectly well what he meant.

"We're done with you, Richard; don't waste your lives running and hiding when you don't have to. We owe you some peace and quiet."

"That doesn't sound like a promise to forget we exist," I said. "And despite what everyone says to the contrary, I know my name is still in your computer."

"We won't bother you anymore; just let us know what you re doing from time to time so we don't have to assign people to check on you, okay?"

"Well," I said and lapsed into silent despair, unable to think beyond that.

Dansforth looked away, studied the room briefly, his eyes lingering on the parachute bag and the few meager personal things I'd stacked on the floor. Presently he turned back to me, his eyes warm and friendly, his voice sincere.

"Okay, tough guy, do it your way," he said as he stood, pulled on his coat, retrieved the report and stepped out onto the porch. "But remember: Brandy is a beautiful woman who wants nothing more than a home with a rose garden and a cozy fire on the hearth. What will you do if you spend the next few years hiding from us only to find she's dreaming of a more stable man who can give her those things? Have you thought about that?'

"Take a hike, Dansforth" I grumbled through the screen door.

He marched to the agency sedan without looking back, got in and sat motionless behind the wheel as though he were trying to decide whether he should drive away or come back in to talk to me some more.

A decent guy, that Dansforth. He had the job and the prestige he wanted and enough savvy to live long enough to be promoted to Director someday. He seemed to have a firm grip on his life, his priorities in order and eyes on a brighter future for the world. To an outsider his life might seem a tangled mess of covert intrigue and senseless mayhem, but it wasn't. It was neat and simple, everything clearly cut and perfectly defined. For Steve Dansforth, that made life easy.

My life, in comparison, was a disaster. Looking around the room I realized I had become a junk collector without purpose or direction. The thousand pages of manuscript I had agonized from my head rested in disarray on the shelf above the computer. I hadn't given a thought to it for nearly a year, hadn't mailed a single copy to anyone or composed a query letter explaining why I thought it was the finest novel anyone had ever written on this continent or any other.

Blueprints for an OX-5 American Eagle biplane curled away from the wall under long shelves of dust-laden books. Spiders had woven webs across the ceilings and corners of every room and I

hadn't the will or the energy to sweep them away. An oil painting, half completed, leaned sadly on an easel in a far corner, the pigments mixed so earnestly many months before now hard as a brick on the palette, brites and fitches strewn on the little metal typing table.

So many things begun; nothing finished.

I chewed my lip, watching Dansforth fumble in his coat pocket for the ignition keys, and decided I'd lost control of my life, had lost the vision of the dreams Brandy and I had made not so many years back in a different world and life.

After he drove away I gathered the bundles from the floor, hauled them to the motor home and checked to see if I'd forgotten anything important. Satisfied I had everything I needed, I secured the house, fired up the engine and was soon headed north toward Brandy's parent's home in Portland.

After two weeks vacation there we'd be on our way to complete the journey we had begun years earlier. Then I'd take her to the Seychelles as Calhoun had suggested.

It was ten minutes after twelve, October 15th. The agency's big purge was underway in San Diego and I was glad not to be a part of it. In two days I'd be in Portland. We'd tie up all the threads we had pulled in the fragile cloth of our lives, forgive and forget and make plans for our future.

But I had no idea, as I drove away with these dreams that before I could truly love her I'd have to find myself. I'd have to tie up the loose ends in my own life before I could ever expect her to consent to permanent reconciliation. It would be a journey that would lead me into the deep wells of my own mind where I'd confront a future Richard who would challenge me to come to grips with the past, to doubt my own sanity, to face and accept the inevitability of death, the intransigence of the cosmos and the frailty of human existence. I never dreamed the search would demand a new definition of love that did not include the concept of sacrifice, never imagined we were beginning a journey that might cost us more than either of us were willing to give.